

# **News Framing in Crisis:**

## **A Study of Hong Kong's Press Coverage of The 1989 Pro-Democracy Movement in China**

by  
**Tak-hung Fung**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Philosophy  
(Communication)  
in the Chinese University of Hong Kong  
1990

Thesis Committee:  
Dr. Joseph Man Chan, Chairman  
Dr. Leonard L. Chu  
Dr. Kuang-sheng Liao

theis  
FN  
5369  
H72F86

316310



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Traditional Chinese men do not praise their wives openly. So Yolanda, don't be upset. With all my heart, I hope I could have told the others how you have supported and encouraged me to work on this thesis. I certainly would be very proud if I could have let the others know how hard you worked even in your pregnancy to support the family when I had to concentrate on school work. I truly think that this thesis would not have been done if not for your patience, love and care. But still, I am too traditional to praise you openly. And I am too shy to tell the others just how much I love you.

But there are other people whom I have to thank openly. Dr. Joseph Chan, the chairman of my thesis committee, has invested much time on my thesis and have given me a lot of insightful advice. Although my late submission of the thesis have totally spoiled his holiday in Europe, he did not complain. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Dr. Leonard Chu and Dr. Kuang-sheng Liao. As members of my thesis committee, they have made a lot of useful suggestions and criticisms.

I am indebted to the journalists who have kindly granted me interviews. Most of them have shared with me a lot of unforgettable days and nights in Beijing, especially in the Tiananmen Square. The promise for anonymity, however, forbids me from thanking them individually. Only a few names can be mentioned here. They include Mr. Tsang Tak Shing and Miss Yung Wei Ling of *Ta Kung Pao*, and Mr. Liu Ruixiao of *Wen Wei Pao*. Without their help, this thesis could not have been written.

I am grateful to Mr. Pao Wan Lung, former controller of ATV News, for his support. Mr. Pao has kindly made special arrangements which



enabled me to further my studies while keeping my job.

I also owe my thanks to Dr. Leonard Chu and Dr. Michael Wei for some special reasons. I will never forget their trust in me.

And finally a few words to my forthcoming baby. I thank you, no matter who you are, for having given me hope and strength to survive the hard time. For I knew that if I did not work hard and finish the thesis in time, I will not have enough time to be financially prepared to welcome you to this world.

I love you.



## ABSTRACT

This study aims to study how and why news framing shift from the routine mode to the crisis mode by examining Hong Kong's press coverage of the Beijing pro-democracy movement in 1989. It is found that the initial news frames vary with the press' political ideologies spanning from the left to the right. As the crisis unfolded, all the newspapers converged in showing their support for the students and their opposition to the Chinese Government. However, when the Beijing authorities regained control, the newspapers began reverting to their original positions.

This crisis is characterized by a high degree of power uncertainty as well as heavy social involvement. These are conducive to the relaxation of organizational control over journalists which, when coupled with the journalists' personal involvement, in effect render journalists' personal inclination the dominating factor in news framing. Once the crisis is over, organizational control is resumed and personal tendencies are again suppressed. That explains how news framing shifts from one mode to the other.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

As a journalist, I will never forget the experience of reporting the Tiananmen Square tragedy in 1989. The excitement, the involvement, the sense of achievement in beating the news blackout and the depression in witnessing the massacre were all beyond compare.

As a graduate student of mass communication, however, the tragedy interests me in another way. Studies have found newspapers in Hong Kong to be framing major political events in totally different ways according to their background (Chan and Lee 1984, Lee 1987). Yet, it was certainly not the case this time. In a surprising move, the leftist press took an anti-Beijing stand. The commercial press also gave up their moderate posture towards the Chinese government. Both of them had joined the rightist *Hong Kong Times* in condemning and de-legitimizing the Chinese government in their news reports.

What interests me more is that as soon as the situation was stabilized, the newspapers became 'normal' again. Differences in news framing between different types of newspapers recurred. All these led me to the decision to study how and why news framing shifts from the routine mode to the crisis mode and then back again.

A search through the literature revealed that little had been done in this field. However, basing on researches on news framing in routine times and organizational behaviour in crises, I was able to put forward a set of assumptions to be tested. The portrayal of the Tiananmen Square incident by the Hong Kong



organizational behaviour in crises, a set of assumptions are generated. A number of studies have confirmed that, during routine situations, the interest of the news organization is a major factor in determining news frames. The personal interests and inclinations of the journalists, on the other hand, is always suppressed. In a crisis, however, the situation will be quite different. It is hypothesised that (1) during a crisis, due to the uncertainties of the situation, the organizational control on journalists will be loosened; (2) the strong personal involvement of journalists will turn them into advocates rather than gatekeepers and (3) as a result, the personal interest of journalists will become more important in news framing in a crisis.

The portrayal of the Tiananmen Square incident by the Hong Kong press provides a good case for testing these hypotheses. The Hong Kong press was operating in the routine mode during the first stage of the student movement when the political and social situation in both China and Hong Kong was still relatively stable. Following the sharp confrontation between the students and the government, the press gradually entered the crisis mode. Then the routine mode made a comeback after the situation was stabilized. Analyzing how the same incident was framed by the press in different stages will give us a clear picture of how and why news framing is different between the routine mode and the crisis mode.

This thesis is organized into eleven chapters. After these opening words in Chapter One, I shall go on to review the literature on the framing of news in the next chapter.

A model of news framing in crisis will be put forward in Chapter Three.

The press structure of Hong Kong will be introduced in Chapter Four, followed by methodology and hypotheses of this study.

From Chapter Six to Chapter Ten, I shall illustrate how the Tiananmen Square incident was framed by the Hong Kong press in different stages and the factors involved.

I shall discuss the implications of these findings in the final chapter.



## CHAPTER TWO

### NEWS FRAMING

#### 2.1 The Concept of News Frames

"Objective reporting" has become a doctrine in western journalism since the end of World War I (Schudson 1978). Most people believed that news should be identical with "facts" and insulated from "values". However, following numerous studies in recent years, the myth of absolute objectivity in news reporting has lost ground. Instead of being a mirror reflecting the "reality", news is now rather seen as "the active, patterned remaking performed by mirrors in a fun house." (Gitlin 1980). Or, in Tuchman's words, the reality is **constructed** rather than impartially reflected in news (Tuchman 1978).

In the last fifteen years or so, a number of different studies have come to the same conclusion: there is a set or sets of rules, either recognized or unrecognized, which governs the daily work of journalists, enabling them to decide, among the infinite number of everyday occurrences, what and how to report. These rules are labelled with different names. Some call it "**news or journalistic paradigms**" (e.g Chan and Lee 1984; Chan 1987; Bennett, Gressett and Haltom 1985). Others call it "**news perspectives**". (Altheide 1976; Gans 1979) It is also referred to as "**media logic**" (Altheide and Snow 1979) or "**media frames**" (Tuchman 1978, Gitlin, 1980).

Although these terms are used to illustrate similar concepts, they have different emphases. For example, paradigms, defined as "gestalt worldviews" (Chan and Lee 1984) are more conceptual and encompassing. The concept of



news frames, on the other hand, refers more to the daily operation level and is more event-oriented. The latter can be regarded as a subset of the former. As this study is designed to trace the media portrayal of a social crisis but not so much journalistic paradigms as a whole, the concept of **news frames** would be more appropriate.

"Frame" was originally used by Ervin Goffman (1974) to refer to the principles by which one organizes everyday experience. The concept was later applied by Gaye Tuchman (1978) and Todd Gitlin (1980) in news analysis. Gitlin defines news frames as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual." (Gitlin 1980). In other words, news frames not only decide what aspects of a certain occurrence should become news; they also decide how journalists, and, in turn, the audience, should make sense out of these occurrences. A civil protest can be framed as either a "disturbance" or a "campaign to fight for justice" (Gitlin 1980). A murder case can be interpreted as either a crime or an ideological issue (Gerbner 1964). There are a lot more examples which suggest that the meaning and presentation of a news event will differ when framed in different ways.

## **2.2 The Formation of News Frames**

As what has been well established in the field of sociology and psychology, people with different expectations, backgrounds and in different positions perceive events differently. There is no exception in the field of journalism.

All journalists are mix-role social beings while performing their professional duties. They are at the same time employees of a news organization,



members of the profession of journalism and well educated grown up citizens in the society, each having one's own personal background and experience. Their interpretations of the world are, therefore, unavoidably influenced by at least three sets of interests: (1) **the organizational interest**, (2) **the professional interest** and (3) **the personal interest**. Furthermore, the meaning of an event is also determined by the background against which it is perceived. In newsmaking, therefore, the **social context** is also a major factor determining the significance of different events.

#### A. Organizational Interests: Political vs Commercial

The **interest of news organizations** has been cited as the major factor affecting the framing of news in a number of studies (e.g Gerbner, 1964; Chan and Lee, 1984; Lee, 1987). The interest of news organizations, in turn, are mainly determined by their primary goals.

There are two major types of news organizations in terms of their primary goal: the advocate press and the commercial press. The focus of news interpretation is totally different between the two.

The term "advocate press" refers to all newspapers which explicitly promote a particular set of ideas. It includes "partisan newspapers" which explicitly and firmly advocate particular political ideologies, and newspapers run by different interest groups. For the advocate press, every news story must first be politically filtered to find out whether it is related to the interest of the newspapers. If it is, the story will be bounded within a political frame and be interpreted according to its ideology.



Gerbner (1964) illustrates how newspapers with different political stances differ in reporting a murder case. He finds that the political press tries to explain the case in a cultural context while commercial papers tend to play down its political implications. Chan and Lee (1984) also single out political ideology of news organizations as the major variable in the formation of "journalistic paradigms" in Hong Kong.<sup>1</sup>

Commercial newspapers, on the other hand, apply totally different logic. Their primary concern is to compete with other newspapers and make revenue, just like what other entertainment media do (Hirsh 1977). Therefore, their choices and presentations of news are mainly audience-oriented. They select and handle stories in a way that readers will be "interested". "Boring" stories are either avoided or downplayed.

Commercial newspapers with different target readers also frame stories with different emphases. Rosenthal (1978) finds that newspapers with a large circulation tend to frame riot news with a "problem-solving" approach. Newspapers identifying themselves with lower-middle class communities are found to take riots as something unavoidable.

Although the "advocate" press and the "commercial press" frequently go on separate ways in framing news, their interest may change with time and types of story. A study of Hong Kong newspapers find that even the party press sometimes put on the "economic lens" when handling stories that are perceived

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<sup>1</sup> Studying press reports on a civil protest in Hong Kong, Chan and Lee concluded that "political ideology" is the major factor determining the "journalistic paradigms" of Hong Kong newspapers. They found that "leftist" papers were more supportive of the protesters while the "rightists" papers had sided themselves with the Hong Kong government.



as having no political significance (Lee 1987).<sup>2</sup> For the commercial press, on the other hand, not all types of stories are found to be revenue-oriented (Tunstall 1971).<sup>3</sup>

#### B. Professional Interests

Apart from organizational interests, the interpretation of news is also shaped by the **professional interests** of journalists. Their interests as professionals are determined by their self-perceived role as journalists--something which they expect themselves to achieve as a member of the profession.

There are two major models of journalism: the gatekeepers and the advocates. The gatekeepers see themselves as "public servants", whose major role is to "detect, emphasize and disseminate" "important information" to the public as a whole. Individual members of the public have to make sense out of the news by themselves according to their own interests. The advocates, on the other hand, see themselves as "lawyers" representing the interests of certain groups in the public. It is the interests of the "client group", rather than the whole public, that is taken care of in news reporting (Janowitz, 1975).

Different professional interests produce different frames on news events. A labour dispute may be interpreted by the "gatekeepers" in terms of the inconvenience it causes to the public, as they feel that is what the public (as a

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<sup>2</sup> Lee finds that although the leftist papers in Hong Kong are keen at promoting the political interest of the Chinese government, they do pay attention to profit and competition while handling non-political stories. A assistant chief editor of *Ta Kung Pao*, a Hong Kong newspaper directly financed by the Chinese Communist Party, remarked, "...for nonpolitical issues, we pay more attention to marketing and reader's interest." (Lee 1987: 73)

<sup>3</sup> Not many studies on news frames have used "organizational interest" as a variable. Most researchers used, instead, either the "political" or the "economic" factor to explain news frames. It may not be appropriate, however, to use one single factor to explain two completely different type of newsmaking logic. For example, the commercial press is not necessarily in the "middle" of the political scale. Therefore, the political factor alone cannot account for the difference between the commercial press and the political press.



whole) is most concerned about. But for advocate journalists who are interested in labour welfare, this may be a story that illustrates the injustice in the labour laws. The same story will be presented quite differently because of different interpretations by two groups of journalists.

Even followers of the same professional model might have different professional expectations. Johnstone, Slawski and Bowman (1972) surveyed the American journalists in the early 70s. Their study was replicated by Weaver and Wilhoit (1986) twelve years later. Both studies report that journalists in the United States view the "extremely important mass media role" differently among themselves. The self-perceived role of journalists are bound to affect their perception of news events. For instance, both the Johnstone and Weaver studies show that a considerable number of American journalists (76% and 66% respectively) agree that "investigating government claims" as the most important professional task. For these journalists, special attention must be paid to detect and play up possible frauds of the government in the stories they cover.

### C. Personal Interests

Unlike "organizational interests" and "professional interests", the significance of journalists' **"personal interests"** as a factor of news framing has not drawn much attention. White's classic study of "Mr. Gates" (1950) suggests that news editors select wire services stories in a subjective way. However, he is also quick to stress that the subjective judgements of Mr. Gates are actually limited by his superiors and competing media. He in fact enjoys only little "real autonomy".

Most studies on the topic come to similar conclusions, arguing that personal attitudes of journalists can easily be suppressed by both organizational



and professional needs (e.g. Kerrick, Anderson and Swales, 1964; Sigelman, 1973; Drew, 1975; Shoemaker, 1987). However, there are also a few studies which suggest that, despite being suppressed by organizational and professional factors, personal interests of journalists do play a part in the interpretation of news events. Starck and Soloski (1970) find in an experimental study that reporters tend to write more accurate stories on someone who looks alright to them. Furthermore, Gitlin's study (1980) on media treatment of the anti-war movement in the United States (1980) shows that journalists' personal sympathy of the campaign sometimes prevailed over the media's general disapproval of the movement.

One can fairly argue that both cases cited above are not sufficient evidence to support the influence of personal attitudes in newsmaking. Starck and Soloski's study was conducted in an experimental environment under which reporters had no organizational and professional bindings. Gitlin's case can also be treated as exceptions that best serve to prove the rule. But the fact that these exceptions exist can also imply that there are certain situations where personal interests of journalists are less suppressed. This may be the case when organizational and professional interests are not clear, as suggested by Starck and Soloski's. This thesis will also attempt to establish the importance of personal interests of journalists in news framing during a crisis situation. It will be explored in greater details later.

#### D. The Social Context

So far we have discussed how "organizational", "professional" and "personal" interests affect journalists' perception of news events. Events will not mean the same to different people with different interests. Yet it should not be



ignored that meanings will also change according to variations in the social context.

The "context" of a society is mainly defined by its political, economic and social situations. The social context affects the framing of news in two ways. First, it provides a framework within which journalists can do their job. The political system, for example, determines the press system and in turn defines the role of journalists. The economic and power relation of the society also sets limitations on the way journalists perceive things. "Radical" opinions are always deemed as either politically intolerable or socially unacceptable.

However, the meaning of the word "radical" varies according to the changes in the social context. Anti-war campaigns in the United States were seen as "radical" by the press in the 60s. Yet, it became acceptable in the 70s, while the US society generally felt that the country could not win the war (Gitlin 1980). In Hong Kong, a number of newspapers tune down their critical stance against the Chinese Government, facing the political reality that China will become the new ruler of Hong Kong in 1997. (Chan 1987).

Second, the social context is also like the "ground", in psychological terms, against which a figure is perceived (Morgan 1961). In the same vein, the significance and meaning of a news event is also highlighted by its contrast with the social context. Any variations in the social background, no matter political, economic, social or others would mean changes in the meaning of events. News on foreign investments, for example, will be framed as an indicator of political confidence in Hong Kong. In Britain, the same story may well be interpreted in terms of job opportunities.

## E. Summary

The discussion above shows that the meaning of a news event to journalists is mainly decided by four factors, namely (1) organizational interests, (2) professional interests (3) personal interests and (4) the social context.

However, the relative importance of these factors in news framing is not constant. As Gans (1979) rightly points out, although some considerations are always relevant, the "number and mix" that go into specific stories vary. There should also be a difference between the "frame mix" in normal times and in crises. We will discuss these differences in the following chapter.



## CHAPTER THREE

### ROUTINE MODE VS CRISIS MODE

In the last chapter, we have listed various factors which decide the patterns of newsmaking. In this chapter, we will discuss the relative importance of these factors in changing with social situation.

Most researches so far have only focused on the behaviour of news organizations in normal situations. Although some scholars have shown their interest in news operations in an "abnormal" context, such as crises and disasters, few have attempted to explore the differences between news reporting in the two contexts in a systematic way (Robinson 1970; Waxman 1973; Kueneman et al, 1975; Scanlon et al, 1978; Whitney 1981).

So (1982) points out the need to study systematically the two "modes" of reporting (routine and crisis). He suggests:

Differentiation of the two modes of reporting may have analytical and practical significance....<However,> new elements (such as new knowledge, new experiences or structural rearrangements) may arise in the crisis mode which may lead to a change in the dominant journalistic paradigm. Thus, a theoretical implication may be that we should put more emphasis on the analysis of critical events in order to understand how paradigms shift from one to another. The routine mode does not show much internal dynamics of the press, but is still important as object for analysis of implicit socialization and the formation of socio-political hegemony (the social construction and definition of reality).

This thesis, basing on these assumptions, will try to trace how news frames shift from the routine mode to the crisis mode.



### 3.1 Definition of Crisis

"Crisis" is a broadly defined term in social studies. It is often treated synonymously with stress, panic, catastrophe, disaster, violence or potential violence (Robinson 1968).

For research purposes, social scientists distinguish between two types of crises: the consensus type and the dissensus type. Consensus type of crises are those when there is agreement on the meaning of the situation, the norms and values that are appropriate, and the priorities that should be followed (Quarantelli, 1970). Natural disasters, as well as those disasters occasioned by technological agents, are major examples of this type of crisis. Dissensus type of crises are conflict-containing situations where there are sharply contrasting views of the nature of the situation, what brought it about, and what should be done to resolve it (Stallings, 1973). Social conflicts, in general, fall into this category.

Barton (1970) defines crisis as a "collective stress situation" where "many members of a social system fail to receive expected conditions from the system." Crisis is also a "turning point" that distinguishes the outcome of an event "favourably or unfavourably, between life and death, violence or nonviolence and resolution or protracted conflict" (North et al., 1963). In other words, a crisis can be defined as the critical stage of an incident which may seriously threaten the stability of the society. It may either jeopardize the political structure (political crisis), the economic structure (economic crisis) or the social structure (social crisis, natural disasters).

Wiener and Kahn (1962) outline some important features of a crisis:

- (1) Crisis is often a turning point in an unfolding sequence of events and actions.



- (2) Crisis is a situation in which the requirement for action is high among participants.
- (3) Crisis produces uncertainties in assessing a situation and in formulating alternatives for dealing with it.
- (4) Crisis reduces control over events and their effects.
- (5) Crisis raises tensions among participants, especially in political crisis involving nations.

### **3.2 News Framing: Routine Mode and Crisis Mode**

As discussed in the last chapter, the "meaning" of a news story is determined by the interaction between three sets of values (organizational, professional and personal) and variations in the social context. The notion of "frames", defined as "persistent patterns", suggests that these factors interact with each other in a systematic rather than a random way.

#### **A. The Routine Mode**

##### Organizational interest as Powerful Factor

Under normal conditions, organizational interests of news media are usually clear and strong. Organizational policies, no matter subtle or overt, are usually accepted by journalists as a natural and major part of their news judgement (Warner 1971; Stark 1962).

Sigelman (1969) describes how this is done. He points out that apart from newsroom socialization, as carefully studied by Breed (1955), news organizations also control journalists through recruitment. Journalists, on the other hand, select the "right" news organizations to work for. Harmony is thus created between journalists and their employers. Organizational interests are



seldom challenged. They penetrate subtly into the mind of journalists and become a major factor guiding their interpretation of events.

A number of studies have singled out organizational interests as the major factor shaping the frames of journalists (e.g. Gerbner 1964; Chan and Lee 1984). The strongest evidence, perhaps, is Donohew's study on newspaper reports on the Medicare issue in the United States. Focusing his efforts on newspapers in the Kentucky state, Donohew finds that, among other factors, the publisher's attitude alone was able to account for 50% of variance in newspaper content. The finding is clear enough to support the argument that, in normal times, organizational interests is an extremely powerful factor in the framing of news.

#### Professional Interests as Suppressor of Personal Interest

During normal times, most journalists see themselves as gatekeepers rather than advocates. As gatekeepers, journalists have to detach themselves from the outside world they observe. Journalists are cautious that, as professionals, their own interests and attitudes should not be reflected in news.

Organizational interests, on the other hand, cannot be so easily suppressed by professional interests. One of the reasons is that, as discussed above, organizational policies are absorbed by journalists in an unconscious way. Journalists, therefore, are usually not aware that they are "biased" by organizational values.

#### Personal Interests Suppressed

The discussion above show that journalists' personal values are always suppressed by organizational and professional factors.



In normal times, journalists do not have specific attitudes towards most events. Even if they do, their attitudes are most probably in line with organizational interests as a result of selective recruitment and self-selection. In times when journalists disagree with organizational policies, their personal perceptions are still held back by professionalism.

As a result, journalists can seldom put forward their views in their work. The best they can do is to "couch their views subtly" into news stories (Chan and Lee 1988).

### B. The Crisis Mode

In a crisis, however, the relative importance of factors of news framing can be quite different from that in routine times. One of the possibilities is that the personal values of the journalists are less suppressed by both organizational and professional values.

#### Organizational Control Less Effective

It seems natural that a news organization tends to tighten up its control on its staff in case of crises (Gitlin 1980). Quite a number of news organizations even make it a policy that news reporting should be more cautious, i.e. stricter control, in crises than in normal times (Kueneman et al., 1975).

This may be the case in small scale crises where the situation is still stable and the involvement among journalist is low. In large scale crises which provoke high degree of uncertainties and involvement, nevertheless, it is difficult for news organizations to maintain, not to mention tightening up, its control over journalists. In case of such a crisis, the gatekeeping system (one of the most



effective means to control news content) breaks down. It fails to function because the newsroom is overloaded with information which needs to be processed with utmost urgency. Waxman (1973) finds that a number of radio stations were actually in an "open-gate" situation during natural disasters: a situation where a substantial amount of information totally escapes the editorial process and go on the air "raw".

Furthermore, even if a news organization can manage to control, its interests cannot be so clearly defined in crisis as in normal situations. Crises produce uncertainties. The crisis situation, as a "turning point", make it extremely difficult for a news organization to evaluate the situation and identify its goals. Organizational control is likely to be weakened because of these ambiguities.

#### Professional Interests: Advocating instead of Gatekeeping

In a large scale social crisis, journalists, like other members of the society, are likely to be involved one way or the other. Personal feelings are strong. Under such conditions, it would be difficult for them to act as gatekeepers who have to be detached from personal judgements. Instead, journalists are more likely to become advocates rather than gatekeepers in crises (So, 1982).

#### Personal Interests: Less Suppressed

As a result of the paralysis of organizational control and the adoption of the advocacy model, personal perceptions of journalists are less suppressed in the framing of news in crises than in normal times.

The breakdown of the gatekeeping system lends greater power to the reporter to control the content of news. Reporters also become the major



definers of the situation , depending on their personal judgements. Tom Wicker, the New York Times reporter who covered the Kennedy assassination in 1963, describes how his "instinct" works in gathering the story in crisis:

That day a reporter had none of the ordinary means or time to check and double-check matters given as facts. He had to go on what he knew of people he talked to, on what he knew of human reaction, on what two isolated "facts" added up to, and above all, **on what he felt in his bones....**In a crisis, if a reporter can't trust his instinct for truth, he can't trust anything (Wicker 1965).

Being an advocate, the reporter identifies himself with certain groups of members in the society. He feels more confident and free to express his own perception in his work, assuming the support of his "client group". When there is no gatekeeping, the reporter's "instincts", "what he feels in his bones", become an important factor deciding how a crisis is framed in news.

### 3.3 Routine Mode vs Crisis Mode: A Comparison

The differences between news framing in routine and crisis situation can be summarized as follow:

	<u>Routine</u>	<u>Crisis</u>
<u>Organizational Control</u>	Strong	Weak
<u>Professional Interests</u>	Gatekeepers	Advocates
<u>Personal Interests</u>	Suppressed	Less Suppressed

Basing on these assumptions, this thesis will explore how the 1989 pro-democracy movement in Beijing was framed by the Hong Kong press in both the routine mode and the crisis mode.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE PRESS STRUCTURE IN HONG KONG

The forty three registered daily newspapers in Hong Kong<sup>1</sup> can be divided into two streams: the political press and the commercial press. (Lin, 1977: 62; Tseng, 1973: 282)

#### 4.1 The Political Press

Politics in China is a major factor shaping the press structure in this British colony. Hong Kong sees a press-party parallelism growing not out of local politics but is "a residual extension of modern Chinese politics" (Lee 1985). In other words, the political press in Hong Kong identify themselves not with local political groups, if there are any, but with the two major political power in China: the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Kuomintang (KMT). Enjoying high degree of press freedom, Hong Kong has remained the major propaganda battlefield between Taiwan and Mainland China for over forty years.

The Leftist Press: The interest of the Chinese Communist Party are chiefly represented by *Wen Wei Pao* and *Ta Kung Pao*. Technically speaking, both *Ta Kung* and *Wen Wei* are not directly owned by the Chinese government. They only call themselves "newspapers of the patriotic united front under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party".<sup>2</sup> However, it is open secret that both newspapers are financially

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<sup>1</sup> The *Hong Kong Yearbook 1989*, pp.267.

<sup>2</sup> Li Zisong, "How can I stop thinking of him: Liao Chengchi," *Contemporary Magazine*. Dec. 23, 1989. PP. 19. Li was the former publisher of *Wen Wei Pao*. He was forced to retire by NCNA in July, 1989.



backed up by the Communist Party. The local branch of the New China News Agency (NCNA), the major CCP organ in Hong Kong, holds the decisive power to appoint senior staff of both newspapers.<sup>3</sup>

The Rightist Press: The Kuomintang, on the other hand, control the *Hong Kong Times* as its mouthpiece in Hong Kong. Being a newspaper owned by the Central Committee of the KMT, the major goal of the *Times* is to "counter communist propaganda" in Hong Kong.<sup>4</sup> Like the leftist press, the *Times* is also financed by the Party. Its publisher is directly appointed by KMT. After the closure of *Kung Sheung Daily News* in late 1984, the *Times* became the only rightist newspaper in Hong Kong.

#### 4.2 The Commercial Press

Apart from the few partisan newspapers mentioned above, the majority of the Hong Kong Press are commercial newspapers with no explicit partisanship.

The commercial press in Hong Kong started to develop in the late 1950s ( Lee, 1987). However, it did not get the chance to prosper until the 1966 riot which raised the demand for more locally oriented mass media ( Kuan and Lau, 1988). Since then, commercial newspapers have grown rapidly and become the dominators of the market.

The primary goal of commercial newspapers is to make profit by attracting the largest possible number of readers. Most commercial newspapers do not want to jeopardize their business by committing themselves deeply to a

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<sup>3</sup> This was disclosed by Zhang Junsheng, a deputy director of NCNA, in July, 1989 when NCNA had to resume the control *Wen Wei Pao*.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with a Deputy Chief Editor of the *Hong Kong Times*.



political stand. In contrast with the political press, they have little or no identification with either the CCP or the KMT. They usually claim themselves as "independent press" or "centrist" press.

Particular successful among the commercial newspapers are the *Oriental Daily News*, *Sing Pao*, *Tin Tin Daily News* and *Ming Pao*. With a total daily circulation of more than one million copies, they top the circulation of all Chinese newspapers.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4.3 Framing Chinese News: The Routine Mode

As pointed out in the last chapter, news framing in the routine situation is mainly determined by the interest of the news organization in the news event. In Hong Kong, this has also been confirmed by a number of studies (e.g. So 1982; Chan and Lee 1984; Lee 1987). When reporting news regarding China, the political interests of the news organization become a more outstanding factor in determining how the news is framed. Different frames are expected to be found in the leftist, rightist and commercial newspapers.

The Leftist Press: Both *Wen Wei* and *Ta Kung* have been following the official line of the CCP closely ever since they were controlled by the NCNA in Hong Kong. Although they have enjoyed relatively higher autonomy after Mr. Xu Jiatun became the director of the Hong Kong branch of NCNA in 1983, they cannot deviate from the official stand in important political issues such as the "anti-spiritual pollution" campaign

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<sup>5</sup> The *Oriental Daily* is the most popular newspaper in Hong Kong with a circulation over 650 thousand. *Sing Pao* is the second, 250 thousand. *Tin Tin* over 200 thousand. *Ming Pao* around 130 thousand. These are average figures from July to December, 1989, provided by the *Asia's Media and Market Weekly*, May 18, 1990.



and the "anti-bourgeois liberalism" campaign.<sup>6</sup> In fact, there had not been a single case before the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989 that the leftist newspapers openly broke away from the Party line.

The Commercial Press: As Chan (1987) points out, "in the past, the rightist as well as the centrist newspapers are characterized by their cordial relationships with the Hong Kong Government and their rejection of China" (pp. 20). This was particularly the case during the 1967 riot, while the centrist newspapers joined the rightist in condemning the leftist of ruining Hong Kong. *Ming Pao*, for example, was reported to have taken a critical stand in 77.8 % of its editorials focusing on the Chinese Government (Lee, 1988).

However, the sceptical stand towards Beijing gradually softened as the PRC adopted the open door policy in the late 1970's. As the PRC became one of the biggest business partner of Hong Kong, no more "critical editorials" was found in *Ming Pao* since 1983 (Lee, 1988)

The commercial press changed its attitude towards the communist regime more explicitly after the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration on the future of Hong Kong in 1984. Although some newspapers, such as *Sing Pao* and *Oriental Daily*, had shown clear reservations towards China's decision to regain the sovereignty of Hong Kong, they are less reserved in welcoming the Joint Declaration as a reasonable framework for the future of Hong Kong. Since the signing of the agreement in December 1984, both newspapers were found to have

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<sup>6</sup> Li Zisong, "It is difficult to run the newspaper in the Hong Kong way," *The Contemporary Magazine*, Jan. 13, 1990. Li was the former publisher of *Wen Wei Pao*.



treated China more favourably in their editorials. (Chan 1987).

According to editors in both *Ming Pao* and *Sing Pao*, the prime concern of their newspapers is to maintain the stability and prosperity in Hong Kong.<sup>7</sup> A stable China is obviously a key factor in achieving this. In routine situation, therefore, it is expected that although commercial newspapers will be more balanced than the leftist papers in reporting news regarding China, it will be keen to avoid being too critical towards the Communist regime that is going to take over Hong Kong in 1997.

The Rightist Press:           The *Hong Kong Times* has taken a strong anti-communist stand since its establishment in Hong Kong. Adopting rigid KMT policy, the *Times* does not recognize the legitimacy of the Communist regime. To indicate its non-recognition, the *Times* extensively put quotation marks around institutions and officials related to the Beijing regime.

As a result of this solid political stand, the *Times* puts most of the news relating to the communist regime into a "anti-communist" context. "It is just natural that we pay more attention to the dark side and instability of the CCP," a deputy chief editor of the *Times* remarks, "We do not make up facts. But as the only anti-Communist newspaper in Hong Kong, we have to provide the right perspective for the readers to interpret the facts."<sup>8</sup>

The signing of the Joint Declaration did alter the *Times'*

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<sup>7</sup> Personal Interviews. May 21, 1990 and May 31, 1990.

<sup>8</sup> Personal interview, May 29, 1990.



framing of China slightly. Chan (1987) reports that since 1984, NCNA not only appears frequently but also more neutrally in the *Times*. However, Chan also observed that this change is only a "tactical turn from hardline anti-Communism to more rational anti-communism" (Chan 1987: 60). Because of the political reality, the *Times* cannot ignore the power of CCP in the shaping of local politics. However, the major goal of the *Times* is to counter communist influence in Hong Kong. This goal has not changed. The *Times* does not believe in the notion of "one country, two systems" from the very beginning.<sup>9</sup> According to a deputy chief editor of the *Times*, the rightist paper does not owe the success of Hong Kong to a stable PRC even at present. "We do not have the 1997 sentiment," he said, "We do not see any reason why we should soften our anti-Communist stand because of 1997."<sup>10</sup>

In short, there is no fundamental change in *Times*' attitude towards PRC after the signing of the Joint Declaration. Although the tactics could be more flexible, its anti-Communist theme remains the same. The *Times* would not hesitate to frame the Communist regime in a negative way if the chance is right.

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<sup>9</sup> See "Hong Kong people definitely do not believe the Communist Party's promises," Editorial, *Hong Kong Times*, April 16, 1989; "Communists' words cannot be trusted," Editorial, *Hong Kong Times*, August 3, 1984.

<sup>10</sup> Interview, May 29, 1990.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### HYPOTHESES, THE CASE AND METHODOLOGY

#### 5.1 Hypotheses

Based on our previous argument on the routine mode and crisis mode of news framing, the following hypotheses are generated:

- I. In routine times, the organizational interest of newspapers is a more powerful factor in news framing than the journalists' personal interest.
- II. In a crisis, personal inclinations of the journalists will be less suppressed by newspapers' organizational interest in news framing than it is in routine times.

"Routine times" are defined as normal situations where the political, economic and social structure are stable. In the routine times, the process of newsmaking is usually done in a systematic and institutionalized way.

"Crisis" is defined as the turning point of any incident which seriously threatens the stability of the political structure (political crisis), the economic structure (economic crisis) and social structure (social). There are two major features of a crisis. First, as a "turning point", a crisis is usually full of uncertainties. Second, as a serious threat to the stability of the society, a crisis usually draws high degree involvement among members of the society.



## 5.2 The Case

The 1989 pro-democracy movement in China provides a good case for examining the differences in news framing between routine and crisis situation. The movement was triggered off by the death of Hu Yaobang, the former General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, in mid April 1989. Tens of thousands of students took to the street to mourn Hu's death. They also took the chance to ask for more freedom, more democracy and cleaning up corruption.

The situation was well under control at first. The whole movement seemed like nothing different from another student movement in late 1986, which gradually died down after a few months of marches and demonstrations. However, the government opted to adopt a tougher line this time. Denouncing the movement as "a conspiracy to negate the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)," <sup>1</sup> the government refused to hold dialogue with the students. The students, in turn, protested by occupying the Tiananmen Square and staging a hunger strike. Millions of Beijing citizens supported the students by taking part in the largest spontaneous political rally in the Chinese capital in forty years.

The movement gradually turned into a crisis following the sharp confrontation between the government and the people. Premier Li Peng imposed martial law on Beijing on May 20. But the people and the students did not back off. The deadlock lasted for half a month. Nobody would be surprised when the government finally decided to extinguish the whole movement and recapture the Square. Yet, no one would have expected that the leaders had chosen to use

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<sup>1</sup> People's Daily, April 26, 1989.



tanks and machine guns to accomplish the task on June 4.

Crisis, is defined as the "turning point" of an important event which causes a great deal of uncertainties and high degree of involvement. The development of the June 4 incident fits well with this criterion. Since the imposition of the martial law, nobody was sure where things were leading to. The government could have decided to "restore the order" of the capital in any minute. The power struggle between Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang and Premier Li Peng has added to the mysteries of the situation. On the other hand, the involvement among Chinese people, not only in the Mainland but also all over the world, to this heart-rending movement needs no further elaborations.

The development of the June 4 massacre also represented a major crisis in Hong Kong. When Hong Kong people witnessed this poignant pro-democracy movement terminated in bloodshed, only eight years were left before this British colony has to be handed back to the communist regime. People in Hong Kong had been supportive of the students since the movement unfolded. One million people marched amid typhoon and heavy rain to protest the imposition of the martial law. After the massacre, one million people gathered again to ask for trials against prominent Chinese leaders. Like China, Hong Kong was also featured with tension, involvement and uncertainties.

The public appearance of Deng Xiaoping on June 9, however, clearly indicated that the Communist leadership led by China's strong man was firmly in control. Later in the month, the Communist Party formally restructured its top leadership in a Party meeting. General Secretary Zhao Ziyang was ousted. Since then, the situation in China was gradually stabilized.

In respect to our differentiation between the routine mode and the



crisis mode of news framing, the development of the Tiananmen Square Incident can be divided into four stages:

- A. The First Stage ( Routine ): From April 15 to April 25 was the first stage. Tens of thousands of students marched on the streets to mourn the death of Hu Yaobang. There were confrontations at the gate of Zongnanhai, the residence compound of China's leaders. Riots broke out in Xian and Changsha. However, the situation was still under the control of the Chinese Government. The degree of uncertainties and involvement was low.
- B. The Second Stage (Transitional): From April 26 to May 18 was the second stage. The April 26 *People's Daily* editorial, labelling the movement as a conspiracy to overturn the Communist rule, gave the first sign of government suppression. The students' hunger strike beginning on May 13 won the sympathy of the mass. The student movement gradually became a large scale civil protest. The situation slowly moved from routine to crisis.
- C. The third Stage ( Crisis ): This was the crisis stage. The crisis began on May 19, when Premier Li Peng disclosed that troops were called into Beijing. Martial was imposed the next day. The hunger strike went on. At the same time, a severe power struggle took place in Zongnanhai. The whole situation was full of uncertainties and anxieties. The peak of the crisis, needless to say, was the massacre on June 4.



- D. The Fourth Stage ( Back to Routine ): The public appearance of paramount Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping on June 9 gave a clear indication that the conservative fraction of the Communist Party was standing firm on its feet. Step by step, the Chinese government regained control over the situation. The Party meeting on June 24 formally ended the uncertainties in the Chinese leadership. Jiang Zemin was elected the new Party leader. Zhao Ziyang, accused of "splitting the Party", was ousted. From then on, the situation in China was gradually normalized.

### 5.3 Research Method

#### A. Sampling

In order to test the hypotheses, five newspapers, representing different categories in the Hong Kong press structure, are selected to be studied. They are:

Leftist: *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Pao*.

Commercial: *Ming Pao* and *Sing Pao*.

Rightist: *Hong Kong Times*.

#### B. Method

The two hypotheses of this research will be tested by both content analysis and in-depth interviews. The two methods are complementary to each other.

#### Content Analysis



First, stories relating to the Beijing pro-democracy movement in the five sampled newspapers are carefully analyzed to find out how different types of newspapers (leftist, commercial and rightist) framed the movement in different stages (routine--transitional-- crisis-- routine). Emphasis is put on finding out whether the news frames are in line with the interest of the news organizations.

It is expected that during the first stage of the incident, when the situation was still stable, the three types of newspapers will frame the student movement in completely different ways, each according to their own organizational line. As the situation gradually turned into a crisis, personal inclinations became the major factor in news framing. The news frames in the three camps of newspapers is expected to converge. After the situation was stabilized, news framing was again dominated by organizational interests. The differences among the leftist, commercial and rightist newspapers is expected to recur.

The method of qualitative analysis is used. All news reports in these five newspapers relating to the movement from April 16, 1989 to September 31, 1989 are intensively studied. It is observed that relevant reports gradually died down since October. Careful comparisons are made between different newspapers to reveal their different themes and emphasis on the same story.

### In-depth Interviews

Although the method of content analysis is able to tell us how the framing of the movement differs between the routine mode and the crisis mode, it is not sufficient to prove that these differences were due to the dominant role



of the journalists' personal inclinations in news framing in crises. It is only through in-depth interviews with reporters and editors who actually took part in the coverage are we able to identify the major factors in news framing in different stages.

A total of thirteen journalists in the five sampled newspapers were interviewed. All the key reporters who were sent to Beijing to cover the movement were included. Furthermore, at least one senior editorial member in each paper who was then responsible for content control was also interviewed.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way, each lasted no less than one and a half hour. First, all journalists were asked to identify the organizational interest of their newspapers and describe the control of newspaper content during normal times. Then, they were encouraged to discuss freely their experience during different stages of the movement. Special emphasis was put to find out the organizational control in the newsroom during crisis and routine situation as well as their personal involvement in the movement.

The findings of the content analysis and the interviews are reported in the following chapters.



## CHAPTER SIX

### DISSENSUS IN ROUTINE MODE: THE FIRST STAGE

During the first stage of the student movement, the three types of newspapers, (leftist, commercial and rightist) framed the movement with significant difference, each according to its organizational interests. The findings supported our hypothesis that during normal times, news framing is usually dominated by organizational interests of the newspapers rather than personal inclinations of the journalists.

#### 6.1 Key Events During The First Stage ( April 15 to April 25 )

- |          |   |
|----------|---|
| April 15 | Hu Yaobang, the former General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, died in Beijing.   |
| April 17 | Thousands of Beijing students marched to the Tiananmen Square. They formally asked the government to reevaluate Hu's historical place. They also made political demands including press freedom and political reform. |
| April 19 | Demonstrators clashed with policemen at the front gate of Zongnanhai, the residence of senior leaders.  |
| April 20 | Confrontations took place at Zongnanhai again. Policemen broke up the crowd by force. A number of people were arrested.   |
| April 22 | The funeral of Hu was held in Beijing. Tens of thousands of students gathered at the Tiananmen square. Riots broke out at Xian and Changsha.  |
| April 23 | Students of five universities in Beijing decided to go on strike. They also appeal for a nation wide class boycott.   |



## 6.2 The Leftist Press

Both *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Pao* followed the official line of the CCP closely during this stage. The student movement was depoliticized by both leftist newspapers. The marches and demonstrations of students were framed as ways to express their grievances over the death of Hu Yaobang rather than a movement to fight for democracy and freedom.

On April 17, over one thousand students of the College of Political Science and Law marched from their campus to the Tiananmen Square, chanting pro-democracy slogans such as " long live democracy ", " long live freedom ", " down with corruption " and " down with bureaucracy ". This was the first time political demands emerged since the death of Hu Yaobang. Both *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Pao* paid little attention to these demands. *Ta Kung Pao*, for example, reported the march as part of the mourning activities all over the country.

The *Ta Kung* story was placed under the following headline:

" People All Over the Nation Spontaneously Held Activities to Pay Respect to Hu Yaobang. " <sup>1</sup>

The lead of the story, which usually identifies the nature of the news and sums up the whole story, did not mention the march at all :

After learning the bad news of Hu's passing away, people in many cities of the country spontaneously held mourning activities. In big cities such as Beijing and Nanjing, university students posted essays in the campus to express their sorrow. In Tiananmen Square, people put down wreaths under the Monument to the People's Heroes all day. There were also other activities to mourn Hu's death. Until midnight, there were still one or two hundred people gathering in front of

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<sup>1</sup> *Ta Kung Pao*, April 18, 1989.



the monument. At its peak, there were hundreds of people.<sup>2</sup>

The march itself was then mentioned in the second paragraph, with only two sentences. The number of students took part in the march was also scaled down from "over one thousand", as reported by other newspapers, to "over five hundred" :

Over five hundred students and teachers marched from their campus to the Tiananmen Square in the afternoon. They gathered at the Monument to the People's Heroes to pay tribute to Hu Yaobang.<sup>3</sup>

There was no mention of the political demands of the students.

*Wen Wei Pao* handled the story in a similar way. Although the march was described by the *Wen Wei* reporter as the "biggest student rally in recent years" <sup>4</sup>, the message was buried in the last paragraph in the lowest part of the page.

The leftist press stuck to the "mourning frame" throughout the first stage of the student movement. Students and other people clashed with the police outside Zongnanhai in two consecutive nights (April 18 and April 19). *Ta Kung Pao*, while playing down the scale of the clash, described the clashes as "new dimensions of mourning activities". <sup>5</sup> It referred to the demonstrators as "students and youths of the society" who marched and petitioned to **mourn Hu's death**".

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> *Wen Wei Pao*, April 18, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> *Ta Kung Pao*, April 19, 1989.



Framing the whole thing as part of the mourning activities over Hu's death served to de-politicize the movement. Our content analysis shows that the political demands of the students asking for freedom and democracy were reported only 4 times in *Ta Kung Pao* and 5 times in *Wen Wei Pao*, comparing to 12 times in *Ming Pao*, 20 times in *Sing Pao* and 25 times in the *Hong Kong Times*.

The selection of words served as another means to de-politicize the movement. Throughout the first stage, the word "demonstration" was never found in either the *Ta Kung Pao* or the *Wen Wei Pao*. "Demonstrators" were often referred to as "crowds" and "people". The word "march" was used only a few times. It was often substituted with "walk" or "move".

There were at least two incidents during this period that might jeopardize the validity of the "mourning frame". One of them was the clashes at Zongnanhai. The other was the riots in Xian and Changsha. In both cases, the incidents were framed by the leftist press in a way which suggested that the trouble was caused by other elements in the society. It was implied that the troubles had nothing to do with the students or mourning. They were not political either. The main theme of students' activities was still to express their sorrow over the death of Hu Yaobang. By doing so, the frame preferred by the leftist newspapers can be defended.

These frames were made explicit by the reporting of the leftist press on the above mentioned incidents. Reporting the first gathering outside Zongnanhai on April 18, both *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Pao* implied that the trouble was not caused by students. *Ta Kung Pao* stated this very clear in its headline:



" Someone tried to enter Zongnanhai by force;  
Students helped to maintain order." <sup>6</sup>

The story went:

By two o'clock in the morning, two thousand students and citizens still gathered in front of Xinhuaamen, asking to talk with government leaders. Xinhuaamen is the main entrance of Zongnanhai where the State Council is located.

Students and the crowd tried several times to force their way into Xinhuaamen. They were stopped by the police. Students at the front line of the crowd held each other's hands, working together with policemen to stop people from pushing forward. As witnessed by journalists at the scene, no violence was used. No one was injured.

*Wen Wei* also reported on the same day that "there were other elements in the crowd except students". <sup>7</sup>

The stance of the leftist press revealed itself more clearly if we compare these reports to a *South China Morning Post* report on the same day:

About 5,000 Beijing students late last night tried to force their way into Zongnanhai, headquarters of the Chinese Communist Party and home of the country's most senior leaders, but were repulsed by a man wall of troops.

The students, calling for democratic freedoms and demanding to speak to Prime Minister Li Peng, surged against the gates of the heavily-guarded exclusive compound, witness said.

Witness said scuffles broke out with the People's armed police guarding the gates but the protest settled into a tense standoff between students and authorities shortly before midnight. <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Ta Kung Pao*, April 19, 1989.

<sup>7</sup> *Wen Wei Pao*, April 19, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> *South China Morning Post*, April 19, 1989.



It can be seen that no effort had been made at all in the *Post* report to identify "other elements" from the "students".

On the second day of the clashes, *Ta Kung Pao* made its stance even clearer by further distinguishing students from the "troublemakers" :

By two o'clock this morning, students and youths of the society who marched and petitioned to mourn Hu's death still gathered and sat in front of Xinhuaamen. They tried to force their way into Zongnanhai again for the second consecutive day, demanding to speak to senior leaders such as Li Peng.

Following the incident last night, thousands of students and youths marched from the Tiananmen Square to Xinhuaamen. They put forward their seven demands again. They also chanted slogans and ask to talk to senior leaders. Judging from how the gathering was organized and the ways the participants spoke and acted, students were clearly outnumbered by other elements.<sup>9</sup>

On April 22, riots broke out in Xian as well as Changsha. Cars and buildings were burnt. Government offices were stormed. Shops were looted. When reporting these incidents, special attention was paid by the leftist press to distinguish the "rioters" from the students.

The lead story on *Ta Kung Pao* the day after the riot was not about the riot itself. It was a story quoting students in Changsha and Xian as saying that they had nothing to do with the riots. It also quoted a Beijing student activist condemning the violence.<sup>10</sup> The story in fact was translated from materials provided by foreign news agencies (Reuters, AFP and AP). This was the only time during this period that the leftist press had based its lead story on materials provided by foreign agencies.

The story telling the details of the riots was also framed to differentiate between students and rioters. It was stressed in the *Ta Kung Pao*

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<sup>9</sup> *Ta Kung Pao*, April 20, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> *Ta Kung Pao*, April 24, 1989



headline that " among the two hundred arrested in the two riots, most were ex-convicts", implying that the chaos were not started by students.<sup>11</sup> *Wen Wei Pao* also carried the clear message in the first paragraph that " according to a source, no university student was arrested in yesterday's riots"<sup>12</sup> The framing of the riots as well as the Xinhuaamen clashes clearly show that the leftist press was keen to give the impression that there was no student democratic movement nor student demonstrations. All students wanted was to express their sorrow over the death of Hu Yaobang.

The way which the Xian and Changsha riots were reported yet revealed another frame of the leftist press -- despite riots and demonstrations, the situation was still under the control of the Chinese Government. There was no sign that things will get worse.

Both *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Pao* dedicated the first paragraph of the riot story to this theme:

*Ta Kung:* The city of Xian was basically quiet on April 23. Students spent the Sunday as usual. There was no march in the streets. No new posters were found on university campuses. Shops opened as usual all day.

*Wen Wei:* Xian was quiet today after yesterday's riot. Traffic restrictions were imposed on areas near the Xincheng Square at the town centre. All vehicles, except three bus routes, were prohibited to drive through the square. Police said that these restrictions will be released tomorrow. Shops opened as usual in the evening. Cinemas and discos were flooded with lights. According to a source, no university students were arrested in yesterday's riot.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> *Wen Wei Pao*, April 24, 1989.

<sup>13</sup> *Ta Kung Pao*, April 24, 1989.

<sup>14</sup> *Wen Wei Pao*, April 24, 1989



This treatment on the riot story was found to be unique in the leftist press. On the same day, all other newspapers dedicated the first paragraph of the story to damages of the riot, rather than the peacefulness in the two cities after the looting and arson.

As a result of the "under control" frame, out-of-control elements such as clashes and violence were played down. One such example was the *Ta Kung* report on the clashes between demonstrators and the police outside Zongnanhai on April 18. The report described in detail what happened at Xinhuaamen that night:

.....At about midnight, a woman proceeded to the front of the crowd with a piece of paper in her hand. She was crying. People who had so far been sitting quietly at the back stood up to watch. This was the first time they pushed forward.

..... Later....a man came out from Zongnanhai. But just when he was about to say something, the crowd at the back stood up again, pushing forward. This was the second time.... Later the crowd pushed forward again.<sup>15</sup>

The description implied that the crowd had been pushing forward because of curiosity: they wanted to know what was going on in the front. It was an accident. There was no clash, no violence nor was there any intention to enter Zongnanhai by force.

Compare the *Ta Kung Pao* report above with the story written by *Hong Kong Standard* on the same day:

Hundreds of aggrieved students tried to force their way into the Chinese Communist Party headquarters last night but were repelled by troops.

Some 5,000 onlookers cheered them on as they clashed with soldiers.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ta Kung Pao*, April 19, 1989.



Before the clash, several hundred students staged a sit-in outside the Xinhuaamen, the seat of the Communist Party, while others in the Tiananmen Square demanded to meet Mr Wan Li, chairman of the National People's Congress.<sup>16</sup>

It can be seen that the *Standard* story was totally different from *Ta Kung Pao*'s. According to the *Standard*, it was a simple student-police clash. *Ta Kung*, on the other hand, tried to frame the story in a way to show that the clashes were accidental rather than political.

Apart from clashes and violence, organized protests by the students were also play down by the leftist press. Beijing students went on strike on April 24. That was the most organized protest by the students so far. Furthermore, since the funeral of Hu Yaobang was already over by the time the strike started, it can not be contained by the "mourning" frame. As a result, neither *Ta Kung* nor *Wen Wei* wrote more than 4 paragraphs on the story, comparing to 10 paragraphs in *Ming Pao*, 7 in *Sing Pao* and 9 in *Hong Kong Times*. The story was also placed at the lower part of the page to indicate its triviality.

The strike was also trivialized by the way the story was written. *Wen Wei*, for example, implied in the headline "some university students in Beijing reported to boycott class today"<sup>17</sup> that not all students supported the boycott.

On the day the strike actually took place, *Ta Kung Pao* framed the story in a similar way. With the headline: "35 universities in Beijing on strike; students went to classes as usual in Shanghai and Guangdong", *Ta Kung Pao*

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<sup>16</sup> *Hong Kong Standard*, April 19, 1989.

<sup>17</sup> *Wen Wei Pao*, April 14, 1989.



suggested that the strike did not have the nationwide impact expected by Beijing students.

Both *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Pao* used the official Xinhua dispatch as the major story on the strike:

(April 24, Xinhua) Students of some universities in Beijing did not go to school today. Teaching activities in most schools were normal.

In Beijing University and Beijing Normal College, students support the strike stopped other students from entering classrooms. In the College of Political Science and Law, some students were stopped on their way to examinations.

In the People's University, students who could not go to class had to stay in the library and reading rooms.<sup>18</sup>

*Wen Wei Pao* went on with some observations by its staff reporters:

Students of the Beijing University went on strike today. It was learnt that there were strikes of various degrees in thirty one universities in Beijing.<sup>19</sup>

Both *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Pao* implied that the strike was unorganized and small in scale. It was also suggested that a number of students did not join the strike voluntarily. On the same day, the Reuters reported that one hundred thousand students took part in the strike. It was also reported that students in other cities were prepared to follow suit. For our study, it does not matter whether the leftist press or the Reuters had told the "truth", what matters is the different ways by which they perceived what the truth was.

### 6.3 The Commercial Press

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<sup>18</sup> *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Pao*, April 25, 1989.

<sup>19</sup> *Wen Wei Pao*, April 25, 1989.



Unlike the leftist press, commercial newspapers in Hong Kong paid attention to the democratic demands of Beijing students from the very beginning of the student movement. The first students' march on April 18 was described by *Sing Pao* as a "demonstration" rather than a mourning.<sup>20</sup>

This was pointed out clearly in the *Sing Pao*'s eye-catching headline of the lead story on April 19 :

" University Students take the chance of mourning to express their grievances: students marched in Beijing and Shanghai calling for democracy and freedom"

*Ming Pao*, on the other hand, handled the story in a slightly different way. Instead of singling out the democratic demands of the students in the first paragraph of the story, it reported simultaneously the two themes of the march:

Four thousand university students in Beijing marched to express their grief over the death of Hu Yaobang. Demonstrators chanted slogans such as "long live democracy", "long live freedom" and "down with corruption".

However, following the clashes outside Zongnanhai, both *Ming Pao* and *Sing Pao* were quick to shift their focus to the conflict between the students and the authorities. *Ming Pao*, for example, emphasised the tension between students and policemen in the first part of the story:

Thousands of students stormed the Xinhuaamen two times in less than twenty four hours. Over one hundred armed policemen lined up in front of Xinhuaamen. Another hundred of unarmed security personnel were also sent to the scene. Part of the Changan Avenue (near Xinhuaamen) was blocked. Police shouted through megaphones, ordering people to leave. The situation was once very tense.

According to UPI, a crowd of five hundred students was dispersed

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<sup>20</sup> *Sing Pao*, April 19, 1989.



by plain-cloth policemen. But Reuters and AFP reported that hundreds of students were still staging a sit-in outside Zongnanhai.

At about ten o'clock last night, thousands of students marched from the Tiananmen Square to the Zongnanhai. They gathered in front of Xinhuaamen. Students kept shouting "no beating" and "no arrest", as there were rumours that a number of people were arrested when the students clashed with the police. They also reiterated their seven demands and asked to speak with Premier Li Peng.

A large number of policemen rushed to the scene later. Roads leading to Xinhuaamen were blocked. Students and onlookers, which numbered to over ten thousand, were asked to leave. The students refused to leave at first. There were moments of a tense standoff before people gradually went away.

The Xinhuaamen was first stormed yesterday morning. University students, mainly from the People's University, tried to force their way into Zongnanhai. They demanded to talk to Li Peng and other leaders. The situation was once very tense....<sup>21</sup>

It can be seen that most of the first part of the story was about the tension outside Zongnanhai. The phrase that "the situation was once very tense" appeared twice in the first five paragraphs. If we compare this report to that by the leftist press which we have discussed earlier, we can see that *Ming Pao* had not made any effort to explain the reason why the students clashed with the police. There was also no intention at all to distinguish students from "other elements" in the crash.

*Sing Pao* gave a similar account, emphasising the tension rather than anything else. The headline of the *Sing Pao* story was printed in red: "Beijing students stormed Zongnanhai in two consecutive nights".<sup>22</sup> Not only was it printed in an unusual colour, it was also unusual in size. The headline spreads from the right of the page through the left, looking like a red banner on the top

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<sup>21</sup> *Ming Pao*, April 20, 1989.

<sup>22</sup> *Sing Pao*, April 20, 1989



of the page. The unusualness of the headline gave the readers the impression that Beijing was in a tense situation.

However, like *Ming Pao*, *Sing Pao* did not try to explore the cause or the nature of the tension. There was no specific mention of the students' demands. Like *Ming Pao*, it was only interested in the tension itself.

The 'tension frame' was also applied to the reporting of the riots in Xian and Changsha. Neither *Ming Pao* nor *Sing Pao* had a correspondent in any of the two cities. Both depended on the official New China News Agency as the major source of information. Both *Ming Pao* and *Sing Pao* stuck to the official accusation that the riots were started by "rioters" and "hooligans" without raising any doubts. The most plausible explanation may be that both newspapers paid no attention to the political implications of the story at all. It was the conflict and the tense situation that was perceived as the theme of the story. Since there was a full account on the tension and the conflict, all other elements became less important.

#### 6.4 The Rightist Press

As predicable by its political affiliation, the *Hong Kong Times*, from the very beginning, framed the student movement as anti-government and anti-Communist. On April 16 (one day after the death of Hu Yaobang), a number of pro-democracy posters were found in university campuses. These posters were interpreted by the Times as " protesting against the communist suppression; urging to fight for democracy".<sup>23</sup> It also carried a news analysis on the same day, making its point more clearly:

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<sup>23</sup> Headline. The *Hong Kong Times*, April 17, 1989.



...Intellectuals, especially university students, feel that they are deeply suppressed as the Communist Party tightened up its control recently. The death of Hu Yaobang may give them a chance to let their feeling out. Radical students may take the chance to resist the Communist dictatorship. They may again express their demand for democracy and freedom openly....<sup>24</sup>

It was not surprising, then, the first student march on the following day (April 17) was again reported as a protest against Communist rule. This theme was highlighted in the headline:

" Students took the chance to criticize the Communist Party." <sup>25</sup>

In fact, the 'facts' quoted by the *Hong Kong Times* report about the march was almost the same as that quoted in the commercial press. Stress was put on pro-democracy slogans such as "long live democracy" and "long live freedom". However, these slogans were put within a anti-Communist context by the *Times*.

The *Times*' report on the clashes outside Zongnanhai was also confined within the anti-government frame. On the first day of the clash on April 18, <sup>26</sup> *Times* stated in the headline that the students asked Premier Li Peng to resign. The demand was not found in any other newspapers in Hong Kong on the same day. On the second clash the following day, a more sensational headline was used by the *Times* to stress the anti-Communism nature of the movement:

"One Hundred thousand youths shouting at Zongnanhai and Tiananmen: Down with dictatorship; Long live democracy." <sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> " Making use of the dead to criticize those alive," *Hong Kong Times*, April 17, 1989.

<sup>25</sup> *Hong Kong Times*, April 18, 1989.

<sup>26</sup> *Hong Kong Times*, April 19, 1989.

<sup>27</sup> *Hong Kong Times*, April 20, 1989.



The *Hong Kong Times* was also the only newspaper in Hong Kong which interpreted the riot in Xian as anti-government in nature. Again, the headline of the story was the major tool used to stress this theme:

"Tens of thousands of people chanted anti-Communist slogans in Xian; students and police clashed".

According to the *Times*, people who took part in the riot were students protesting against Communist rule. They were never labelled as rioters or hooligans as the leftist or the commercial papers did:

A riot broke out during a rally in Xian Saturday. Tens of thousands of people and students attended the rally to mourn Hu Yaobang's death and pressed for democracy. The Shanxi provincial government building was besieged by the crowd. Student were beaten up by police. But the Xinhua news agency claimed that some one hundred and thirty policemen were injured.

According to the Xinhua news agency, the riot in Xian started Saturday morning and lasted until the morning of the following day. Foreign news agencies said that at lease five to six thousand students took part in a march to mourn Hu;s death on Saturday. Quoting foreign witnesses, the agencies reported that the crowd chanted anti-Communist and pro-democracy slogans. They stormed the provincial government building after they arrived at the Xincheng Square.

Witnesses said that demonstrators threw stone at policemen guarding the building. Police beat the crowd with clubs. They witness several students being beaten up. ...

....The furious crowd, including students, then burnt a small house beside the government building.

According to witnesses, students were holding banners when they marched to the Xincheng Square. It was written on one of the banners that "someone who is dead is still living; someone who is alive is already dead". Students said the former referred to Hu Yaobang while the latter to Deng Xiaoping.

University campuses in Xian were full of posters asking for democracy and freedom. In Shanxi Normal College, there was a banner written "down with Communism".



A foreign teacher said there were demonstrations everyday throughout the week. The atmosphere in the campus was both tense and exciting.

Xinhua news agency reported the Xian riot in detail. But there were several points which contradicted with reports by foreign agencies. According to Xinhua, those who took part in the riot were unlawful elements. It (Xinhua) dared not say that they were actually students and ordinary people. Furthermore, it did not mention that students had been beaten up by policemen....<sup>28</sup>

Compare the *Times* report with the Xinhua account of the riot, which was used by most Hong Kong newspapers :

...There were " da zha qiang shaw " ( )<sup>29</sup> in Xian yesterday. Some unlawful elements set fire on cars and houses both outside the provincial government building and at the Xincheng Square. Ten cars and twenty houses were burnt. They also looted a shop.

... It was learned that some unlawful elements sneaked into a crowd of students who were holding a meeting to mourn the death of Hu Yaobang. The meeting was held orderly at first. Then the unlawful elements began to chant anti-revolutionary slogans. They tried to force their way into the provincial government building. They set fire to the reception and the front office of the provincial government. A truck was also burnt. Seeing this happened, some college students left the scene. ....<sup>30</sup>

There are three major differences between the two reports. First, according to the *Times*, people who took part in the riot were students and ordinary people. Xinhua said they were "unlawful" elements. Students "left the scene" after the situation became out of control. Second, the *Times* implied that the crowd was enraged by the policemen who beat up the students. Xinhua gave

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<sup>28</sup> *Hong Kong Times*, April 23, 1989.

<sup>29</sup> "Da zha qiang shaw" is a popular expression in China which refers to the unlawful activities in a riot. The term is also specifically used to refer to the chaos during the Cultural Revolution. In Chinese, "da" ( ) means fighting; "zha" ( ) means smashing something into pieces; "qiang" ( ) means looting and "shaw" ( ) means setting fire.

<sup>30</sup> *Ta Kung Pao*, April 24, 1989.



no reason for the riot, suggesting that the whole thing was the result of hooligans' deviant behaviour. Third, the *Times* singled out anti-Communist slogans in the rally, trying to play it up as the theme of the demonstration. Xinhua, on the other hand, try to play it down. Only some "anti-revolutionary" slogans were mentioned. No details were given. These differences made one point clear. The *Hong Kong Times* was trying to give the impression that what happened in Xian was a righteous anti-Communist movement. The riot started because it was unreasonably suppressed by the authority.

*Times* also paid special attention to the anti-Deng Xiaoping sentiment among the students. Apart from stressing anti-Deng posters and slogans while reporting the student movement, *Times* also carried three special reports on the topic.<sup>31</sup> one of the reports said that Deng might have to resign because of the student movement:

....Something more sensitive is the fact that students have directed their anger at Deng Xiaoping in the movement. ....This reflects the generally strong discontent on Deng among the people and Communist cadres. It seems that the pro-democracy student movement, together with the conflict within the Party itself, will eventually force Deng to leave the stage. This is indeed a dangerous signal.<sup>32</sup>

The Communist Party, in turn, was framed by the *Times* as not being able to tolerate these challenges. *Times*, in fact, was the first to suggest that the movement would be brutally suppressed by the Chinese government. As early as April 18 (three days after the death of Hu), *Times* carried a report

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<sup>31</sup> "Anti-Communist posters in Beida criticizing Deng and the conservatives", *Hong Kong Times*, April 18, 1989; "Discontent on Deng grew stronger after the sudden death of Hu Yaobang," *Hong Kong Times*, April 19, 1989; and "Forcing Deng to resign: a dangerous signal," *Hong Kong Times*, April 22, 1989.

<sup>32</sup> "Forcing Deng to resign: a dangerous signal," *Hong Kong Times*, April 22, 1989.



headlined "The Chinese Communist Party will use force to stop the student movement from spreading". Quoting a "Western diplomat", it said the government would not tolerate the movement to go any further because the situation was already unstable".<sup>33</sup>

On April 21, the Chinese official media warned the public not to take the chance of Hu's death to do anything illegal. *Times* interpreted this as a signal of the tough attitude of the Chinese government. In a special report, *Times* said:

"...in the meantime ( with the official media issuing warnings ), Communist policemen beat up students violently, injuring hundreds of them. People in Hong Kong have already pointed out that using violence is the worst idea. However, it seems that the Communist Party can do nothing better than this. This is what make us more worried about the situation in the Mainland."

The "suppression frame" of the *Times* is made clear by these remarks.

### 6.5 Summary

The leftist press: Both *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Pao* framed the marches and demonstrations of students during this stage as activities to mourn the death of Hu Yaobang. Political implications of the movement were played down. Other "unlawful elements" caused violence and riots. But the situation was still well under the control of the government.

The commercial press: The commercial press interpreted the movement as "pro-democracy" from the very beginning. Yet, no attention was

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<sup>33</sup> *Hong Kong Times*, April 18, 1989.



paid to the political significance of the movement. Instead, both *Ming Pao* and *Sing Pao* were more interested in clashes and tension between students and the government.

The rightist press: From the very beginning, the *Hong Kong Times* framed the movement as resistance against communist rule from the very beginning. Clashes between students and the authorities were played up. It also interpreted the movement as a serious challenge to the Communist regime. It gave the impression to its readers that these challenges would not be tolerated. Brutal suppression was expected.

The following quantitative analysis of slogans and posters reported by each newspapers during this period <sup>34</sup> helps us to understand the frames of these newspapers better :

	<u>Pro-democracy</u> <sup>35</sup>	<u>Anti-Deng</u> <sup>36</sup>	<u>Anti-Communism</u> <sup>37</sup>	<u>Mourning</u>
Tai Kung	4	0	0	14
Wen Wei	5	0	0	15
Ming Pao	13	0	0	7
Sing Pao	20	2	0	8
Times	25	7	3	8

<sup>34</sup> All posters and slogans reported in the six sampled newspapers from April 16, 1989 to April 25, 1989 were counted.

<sup>35</sup> For example, "long live democracy"; "long live freedom"; "press freedom".

<sup>36</sup> For example, " Deng, you can fool the whole world. But we know you are a liar"; " The eighty-four year old Xiaoping is still alive; the seventy-three year old Yaobang died first."

<sup>37</sup> For example, "down with communist dictatorship".



From the table above, we can see that both *Ta Kung* and *Wen Wei* were most interested in reporting slogans and posters expressing sorrow over the death of Hu Yaobang. This supports our qualitative analysis that the leftist press tried to de-politicize the movement by framing it as mourning activities. The statistics also shows that *Sing Pao* and *Ming Pao* are keen at reporting the students pro-democracy demands. It was because the movement was framed by the commercial press as "democratic" in nature. *Hong Kong Times* reported the most of anti-Deng and anti-Communist slogans and posters among the five newspapers. This clearly supports our analysis that the rightist press tried to frame the movement as an anti-Communist campaign.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### FROM ROUTINE TO CRISIS: THE SECOND STAGE

In this stage, the Hong Kong press gradually moved from the routine mode to the crisis mode. Although organizational interests of different newspapers were still the major factor in framing the movement, the influence of journalists' personal interests started to grow. The leftist press gradually deviated from the official line. Framing the movement as "peaceful" and "patriotic", the leftist papers blamed the government for not listening to the students. The commercial newspapers also shifted from their "tension" frame and took a clear stance favourable to the students. The sympathy of both the leftist and the commercial newspapers with the students was shared by the *Times*. However, standing firm on its anti-Communist platform, the rightist paper was still more critical and straightforward in condemning the Chinese authorities.

#### 7.1 Key Events During the Second Stage ( April 26 to May 18 )

- |          |   |
|----------|---|
| April 26 | The <i>People's Daily</i> editorial: " Taking a clear and firm stand against riots" was published. The editorial denounced the student movement as " a planned conspiracy, a riot .....instigated by a small number of people." |
| May 4    | Students held another rally to mark the 70th anniversary of the May 4 Movement. About five hundred journalists also joined the rally. In Hong Kong, over five thousand people gathered at Central to support Beijing students.  |
| May 13   | About two thousand Beijing students decided to go on hunger-strike until the government showed its sincerity to talk with them.   |
| May 14   | More students joined the hunger-strike. A lot of Beijing citizens supported the students by donating money and medicine.  |



- May 15 Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev arrived in Beijing. However, his welcoming ceremony had to be held at the airport instead of the traditional People's Hall as hundreds of thousands of students still occupied the Tiananmen Square.
- May 17 Another big march to support the students, this time joined by workers, cadres and soldiers. In Hong Kong, seven thousand people held a pro-democracy rally at the Victoria Park.

## 7.2 The Leftist Press

The student movement had entered one of its critical stages during this period. Step by step, the students pressed the government harder and harder to meet their demands. They even took the radical move to stage a hunger strike. The large turnout of the three marches, especially the one on May 17, clearly showed that the students had won the support of the mass.

The leftist press sharply changed its attitude towards the movement during this stage. In a surprising move, it gradually deviated from the official stand of the Communist Party and tried to offer its own interpretation of the situation. The movement was no longer de-politicized or trivialized. At last, it even reached a point that both *Ta Kung* and *Wen Wei* showed their full recognition and support of the movement as pro-democracy and patriotic. It also carried sensitive criticisms against the Chinese government for not listening to the students.

The changes in the leftist press were gradual but steady. The first hint could be detected as early as April 26 -- four days after the funeral of Hu Yaobang. Since the student movement broke out following Hu's death, the leftist press had followed the official line closely. The marches and demonstrations were interpreted as part of the mourning activities. Nevertheless, the 'mourning frame' lost its validity after the funeral of Hu. It would have been



awkward to report the protest actions of the students, such as class boycott and marches, as expressing their sorrow over the late Party General Secretary anymore. It was at this juncture the leftist press began to break away from the Party line and found its own way out.

The official *People's Daily* formally announced the end of all mourning activities two days after the funeral of Hu. In a short commentary on April 24, it urged the people to go back to their normal duties:

...Now let us call an end to all the mourning activities. Our task from now on is to turn our grief into strength...and use this strength in a practical way to help the four modernizations in order to prosper our country.

This commentary marked an end to the 'mourning frame' of the official press. From then on, the student movement cannot be interpreted within the old context anymore. One day later, the Communist Party made known its new interpretation of the situation. In a famous *People's Daily* editorial broadcast by the state-owned television and radio station, it labelled the movement as a "conspiracy" "instigated by a small number of people" whose aim was to "negate the leadership of the Communist Party and overturn the socialist system". It urged the public to unite together and stand firmly against riots in order to win this "serious political struggle".

Both *Ta Kung* and *Wen Wei* handled the *People's Daily* editorial in a "strange way" to show their disagreement to the new official line. Although the editorial was generally viewed as an important political statement of the Chinese Government, neither *Ta Kung* nor *Wen Wei* used it as the lead story of the day.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Both *Ta Kung* and *Wen Wei* used the resignation of Japanese Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita as the lead story that day.



*Ta Kung* even put it in the lower part of the page. *Wen Wei*, on the other hand, placed it to the left hand side. Both of them were relatively unimportant locations in Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong.

The location of the story indicated the little importance attached to it by the leftist press. *Wen Wei* even tried to play down the authority of the editorial by referring to it only as an "editorial in a Beijing newspaper" in the headline.<sup>2</sup> It was doubtless that the editorial weighed a lot less under this name than a 'People's Daily editorial' which was often seen as equivalent to a government announcement.

However, it was found that both leftist papers were not prepared to deviate completely from the official line at this point. Neither *Ta Kung* nor *Wen Wei* made special effort in reporting the students' reaction to the allegations. Students' opinion was only found in one sentence in *Wen Wei*, which reported that "some university students in Beijing think that the government have misunderstood their views." The self-defence of the students seemed to be rather weak as reported by *Wen Wei*, compared to other newspapers. According to other reports, the students were "nervous and shocked"<sup>3</sup>; "extremely unhappy"<sup>4</sup>; and "angrily dismissed the allegations".<sup>5</sup> Although both *Wen Wei* and *Tai Kung* had indicated that they did not like the 'riot frame' at all, they could only criticize it subtly.

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<sup>2</sup> *Wen Wei Pao*, April 26, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> *Ming Pao*, April 26, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> *Sing Pao*, April 26, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> *South China Morning Post*, April 26, 1989.



On the following day ( April 27), *Wen Wei* carried a feature story written by its Beijing correspondent Liu Ruishao. Analyzing recent events, Liu, for the first time since the movement began, raised doubts about the official interpretation:

...After watching the situation closely, I find that what students did after the death of Hu Yaobang was due to their enthusiasm to improve the situation in this country.

A number of students pointed out that most of their demands such as " anti-corruption" and "better education" are consistent with government's will.

....The slogans chanted by the students.....are not inconsistent with government policy. Slogans like " down with the Communist Party " were chanted a few times at Xinhuaamen on April 20 and at the Tiananmen Square on April 23. However, such slogans were immediately stopped by students. Students said it was not their will to let these slogans appear.

....It is doubtless that the government has exercised restraint to a large extent. This attitude was generally praised by commentators all over the world. However, there were some sort of allegations recently which aroused fear among students that the movement will be suppressed high-handedly. ....it is the hope of all parties involved to take a more sensible approach towards the whole thing.

It can be seen that the writer had expressed his view in an extremely delicate style. The government stand was not criticized directly. The *People's Daily* editorial was not even mentioned by name. It was only referred to as "some allegations recently". The message, however, was clear. Basing his argument on students' remarks, the *Wen Wei* reporter had made a pretty strong case for the students that they had no intention at all to overturn Communist rule. What they asked for was nothing more than improvements in the country, something which should not be inconsistent with the government's aim. He also pointed out subtly the danger of suppression. It was indicated that any such

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<sup>6</sup> Liu Ruishao, " Calm, Restrained and Understandable: Some Feelings About the Student Movement", *Wen Wei Pao*, April 27, 1989.



intention would not be accepted by Chinese people all over the world.

Subtle as it may be, but the *Wen Wei* reporter made an unusual case of contradicting the official line in the leftist press. *Wen Wei Pao* was soon joined by its leftist partner. On April 27, hundreds of thousands of Beijing students took part in the largest student march in China since 1919. Over one million Beijing citizens cheered the marchers as they walked by. The official Xinhua News Agency, however, reported that only thirty thousand students took part. Apart from the march itself, Xinhua also reported that a number of "workers, scientists, school headmasters and cadres" had urged the students not to join the march in order not to be used to start a riot.

*Ta Kung Pao* started the story with the Xinhua dispatch. However, immediately it went on with an account by its own reporters in Beijing. Contradicting the Xinhua estimation that only thirty thousand students had turned up, *Ta Kung* reporters set the figure at over one million. The report was a serious challenge to the creditability of the official news agency which represents the Party and the Government. Instead of framing the march as a riot, *Ta Kung* stressed in the lead of the story that the march was in remarkable order.<sup>7</sup> It also mentioned specifically some pro-Communist banners carried by the marchers. These banners, such as "long live the Communist Party", "protecting the constitution", "supporting the correct leadership of the Chinese Communist Party" and "insisting on the socialist system", acted as a strong dismissal against the government allegation that the movement was an anti-Communist conspiracy.

*Wen Wei Pao*, on the other hand, did not use the Xinhua story at all. It was the first time since the death of Hu Yaobang that the newspaper had

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<sup>7</sup> *Ta Kung Pao*, April 28, 1989.



completely depended on its own correspondent in reporting such a key event. Like *Tai Kung*, *Wen Wei* also highlighted the pro-Communist banners. The "order" of the march was also stressed.

On May 4, about one hundred thousand students marched again in Beijing to mark the 70th anniversary of the May 4 Pro-democracy Movement. The students also took the chance to reiterate their demands. This time, both *Ta Kung* and *Wen Wei* paid little attention to the official account of the Communist Party provided by Xinhua. *Ta Kung* placed the Xinhua report at the last part of the story, preceded with a detail report by its own correspondents. *Wen Wei* did not use the Xinhua story at all.

The May 4 march was the first occasion so far that both leftist papers had agreed with other newspapers in general on the number of participants in marches and rallies. According to Xinhua, only twenty thousand students took part in the march. Both *Ta Kung* and *Wen Wei* reported five times more: over one hundred thousand. The estimation was close to the figure suggested by other newspapers, including the rightist press.<sup>8</sup>

What was more important, however, was that for the first time the leftist press framed the movement as pro-democracy in nature. The leftist press so far had been very vague in identifying the students' goals. Although the movement was not reported as mourning activities anymore during this stage, the democratic demands of the students were still seldom mentioned by the leftist press. Even in Liu Ruishao's critical article in *Wen Wei* which gave the clear signal that the leftist press disagreed to the Party line, the writer was keen to

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<sup>8</sup> The *Hong Kong Times* for example, reported the figure to be one hundred and fifty thousand. *Sing Tao*, the central rightist paper, reported one hundred thousand. The two commercial papers also put the estimation at one hundred thousand.



avoid the pro-democracy demands of the students. The goals of the students were only quoted as "anti-corruption" and "better education".<sup>9</sup> The April 27 march was only referred to as a "peaceful petition" without defining the aim of the march. This was no longer the case. Reporting the May 4 march, both leftist papers showed little hesitation in highlighting the political nature of the movement.

*Ta Kung*, for example, pointed this out clearly in the lead of the story:

University students marched in many cities in China to mark the 70th anniversary of the May 4 Movement. They expressed their demands for democracy, science and press freedom. They also fought against corruption and bureaucracy.<sup>10</sup>

*Wen Wei Pao*, on the other hand, printed in detail the "May 4th Manifesto" drafted by the steering organization of the student movement:

...The Manifesto stressed that this movement has only one goal. It is to uphold the flag of democracy and science; to liberate the people from feudalism; to promote freedom, human right and legal spirit and to make contributions to modernization.

....The Manifesto pointed out that the current movement is the biggest student patriotic pro-democracy movement since the one in 1919. It is also the extension and continuation of the May 4 Movement. It was unprecedented in history. It is extremely successful....<sup>11</sup>

The student organization which drafted this manifesto was denounced as "illegal" by the government ever since it came into existence. However, its authority was not challenged by *Wen Wei* in any way. No quotation

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<sup>9</sup> *Wen Wei Pao*, April 27, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> *Tai Kung Pao*, May 5, 1989.

<sup>11</sup> *Wen Wei Pao*, May 5, 1989.



marks were used to de-credit its claims. Words which imply doubts, such as "claimed" or "so-called", were not found. Instead, more positive expressions such as "pointed out", "stressed" and "believed" were used. All these served to legitimize the students' notion as a "patriotic pro-democracy movement".

Another thing worth pointing out was that *Ta Kung* had reported for the first time the slogans criticizing government leaders including Deng Xiaoping. Among other banners carried by the students in the march on May 4, *Ta Kung* mentioned in particular one claiming that "Old man politics should come to an end". The criticism was clearly directed against Deng and other powerful old men in the communist country.

However, neither *Tai Kung* nor *Wen Wei* was prepared to side with the students at this point. Although the leftist press had begun to offer its own interpretation of the movement, the official line was still reported in a prominent way by both papers. One illustrating example of this can be found on April 27, the day *Wen Wei* carried Liu Ruishao's feature story which subtly criticized the *People's Daily* editorial. On the same day, in fact, both *Ta Kung* and *Wen Wei* led with reports on Party meetings in Beijing and Shanghai. The theme of these meetings, contradictory to Liu's analysis, was to reinforce the "riot allegation". The leftist press did not try to resolve the conflict between the two different interpretations. Nor was it prepared to give up one of them and stand by the other. It just presented both of them simultaneously and left the choice to its readers.

What the leftist papers were advocating, in fact, was a peaceful resolution. As pointed out clearly by Liu Ruishao's article on April 27, the best that could be done was that "all parties concerned should take a more sensible



approach towards the movement." <sup>12</sup>

As a result of this approach, "sensible moves" by both parties were also played up by the leftist press. We have mentioned above that the hard-line April 26 *People's Daily* editorial was not treated as important news by both *Ta Kung* and *Wen Wei* although it clearly represented the official view. However, the more "sensible" remarks by Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang were treated totally differently. Speaking to a number of foreign delegates attending the Annual Meeting of the Asia Development Bank on May 4, Zhao said that "what is needed most now is to stay calm, be sensible, restrain and keep everything in order. We have to solve the problem by democratic and legal means". Both *Ta Kung* and *Wen Wei* reported these remarks as the lead story of the day although the huge student march took place the same day. The march was the lead story in all other newspapers in Hong Kong that day.

About two thousand students staged a hunger strike on May 13. It was the most radical move by the students so far. Both *Ta Kung* and *Wen Wei* played down this story. The story was found only in the lower part of the page in both newspapers. *Ta Kung* even trivialized the event by scaling down the number of hunger-strikers from two thousand to "five to six hundred". <sup>13</sup>

The lead story in both leftist papers that day was again "sensible" remarks from Zhao Ziyang. Zhao, talking to workers in Beijing this time, urged the students to stay calm in order not to jeopardize the forthcoming Sino-Soviet summit. Again, this arrangement was found to be unique in the leftist press. On the same day, most of other newspapers led with the hunger-strike story.

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<sup>12</sup> *Wen Wei Pao*, April 27, 1989.

<sup>13</sup> *Tai King Pao*, May 14, 1989.



However, the "sensible frame" of the leftist press began to shift as the hunger strike continued. Government officials met with student leaders on May 14 but the meeting ended with no result. The over one thousand hunger-strikers in Tiananmen Square vowed to carry on their struggle until their demands were met by the government. They had refused to take any food for over twenty hours. Some of the students began to feel sick and were rushed to hospitals. The hunger strike finally became the lead story in the leftist press on May 15. *Ta Kung* showed clearly in its report that it worried about the health of those who took part in the hunger-strike:

.....Doctors and nurses said that over ten students fainted and were sent to hospital. It is very hot in Beijing during daytime. The temperature goes as high as over 20 degrees. The nights are much cooler. The temperature dropped to about 10 degrees. It is not difficult to imagine how tough the situation is for the students.<sup>14</sup>

*Ta Kung's* sympathetic approach to the students hinted the complete frame shift of the leftist press three days later. On May 17, over one million people marched in Beijing to support the students. Those who took part in the march came from all walks of life, including workers, cadres, policemen, soldiers and journalists. By then, the students had been hunger striking for four days. Over one thousand of them needed to be treated in the hospital. Yet, there was no sign that the government would agree to the students' demand for a "open dialogue".

Both leftist papers gave up their "sensible frame" at this point. As discussed above, the leftist press had tried to play up rational moves by both sides, giving the impression that it was the responsibility for both the government

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<sup>14</sup> *Ta Kung Pao*, May 15, 1989.



and the students to stay calm and reasonable in order to end the chaos. However, this theme was not found anymore in the reports on the march. The way the march was reported this time indicated that both *Ta Kung* and *Wen Wei* had re-interpreted the situation. Instead of trying to see things from both side, the leftist began to take a firm stand to side with the students.

Unlike reporting the last two marches (April 27 and May 5), both *Ta Kung* and *Wen Wei* showed no hesitation in stressing the huge support for the students this time. *Wen Wei*, calling the students "patriotic", highlighted this point in the headline of the story:

" Over one million people marched in Beijing to support the patriotic students." <sup>15</sup>

*Ta Kung* did the same in the headline and went on with a colourful description:

Over one million people from all walks of life marched to the Tiananmen Square today to support the students who are still in an hunger strike. Spontaneous civil marches like this was seldom found in the history of China.

Thousands of university students from Tianjin arrived in Beijing by train at 5:30 in the morning. As soon as they got off the train, they marched to the Tiananmen Square to support the students who took part in the hunger strike they got off the train. From that moment on, the flow of people marching to the square had never stopped. They came from all walks of life, including workers, cadres, journalists, scholars and tens of thousands of middle school students. Crowds and crowds of people marched into the Square like rivers ran to the sea.... <sup>16</sup>

*Ta Kung* revealed how it interpreted these scenes clearly in another feature story on the same day:

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<sup>15</sup> *Wen Wei Pao*, May 18, 1989.

<sup>16</sup> *Ta Kung Pao*, May 18, 1989.



...The goal of these one million people is very clear. It is to get rid of corruption; to ask for democracy and freedom and to press for political reform.

...Most of the time since the hunger strike began, there had been a lot of onlookers in the Square....But today, the Square was dominated by supporters of the students. Serious and enthusiastic faces can be seen everywhere. They knew what they had come for. They were not playing around....

...These people were not a "small number of people". They are not those who want to have riots. They are all honest "lao bai sing" (ordinary people).

This article made one point clear. The movement, at this point, had gained the full recognition and approval of the leftist press. It was seen as a righteous mass movement to press for freedom and democracy. It was the duty of the government to listen to the views of the "lao bai sing". The official allegation that the movement was a riot was openly and clearly rejected.

As a result of the frame shift, anti-government sentiments among the people was no longer avoided in the reports of the leftist press. For the first time in many years, slogans and banners criticizing government leaders had escaped the tight censorship in the leftist papers. Banners such as " Step down, Deng Xiaoping " ; " Step down, Li Peng " ; " Xiaoping, we all support you as a bridge player" and " Xiaoping, people in Sichuan welcome you home" were reported by both *Ta Kung* and *Wen Wei*. Although these banners had not been played up by the leftist papers as by some other newspapers <sup>18</sup>, the fact that they were reported represented a major change in the newspapers' attitude. All these

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Both English newspapers in Hong Kong, for example, highlighted the anti-Deng sentiment in the headline:  
*South China Morning Post*: " Calls for Deng to quit as demonstrations grow." *The Hong Kong Standard*: "Millions of voices tell Deng to go".



banners can be seen as " counter-revolutionary" by the Chinese government. Yet they were described as " speaking the people's mind " by the leftist press. <sup>19</sup>

The support of Hong Kong people for the movement also got prominent coverage in the leftist press. On the same day of the big march in Beijing, about seven thousand people in Hong Kong gathered at the Victoria Park to back up the Beijing students. The rally was reported by the leftist press in a positive way such as describing it as " in a high spirit"; " widely supported " and " moving" . <sup>20</sup>

Both leftist papers reported in detail the speeches delivered in the rally. Even the remarks made by Sezto Wah, an "unfriendly" legislative councillor to the leftist, were reported in a positive way:

Sezto Wah, the President of the Professional Teachers' Association, was welcomed by a cheering crowd. He said that demands of the Beijing students were rational and sensible. All Chinese people should stand up to bring the Chinese government back to sense. He said that the "riot" was actually started by those in power who refused to listen to the students. He vowed to support the students with all his strength. When he made this remarks, the crowd applauded so hard that it sounded like thundering. <sup>21</sup>

The views of Sezto Wah was seldom reported so positively by the leftist press. The special treatment clearly indicates that the leftist press had shifted its stands considerably from that of the Party.

The two leftist papers also gave prominent coverage to appeals which urged the government to soften its stand: a clear indication that this was what the newspapers wanted as well. On May 17, a number people and groups

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<sup>19</sup> *Tai Kung Pao*, May 18, 1989.

<sup>20</sup> *Wen Wei Pao*, May 18, 1989.

<sup>21</sup> *Ta King Pao*. May 18, 1989.



openly suggested it was the responsibility of the Chinese government to hold "sincere" dialogues with the students in order to solve the problem. Some of them even sent telexes to Beijing to express their views. Their demands were clearly supported by the leftist press. Although all these appeals shared the same theme, they were reported by both *Ta Kung* and *Wen Wei* as separate stories. Not following news editing practices to put relevant stories together, both leftist papers placed the "appeal" stories in different parts of the page. It gave the impression that this is the unanimous voice of all people in Hong Kong.

### 7.3 The Commercial Press

The student movement was framed as "tensions" and "conflicts" by both *Ming Pao* and *Sing Pao* in the first stage. Like the leftist press, the commercial press shifted this frame during the second stage. Although the process of frame shift was quite different between *Ming Pao* and *Sing Pao*, both of them eventually stood firmly on the side of the students and blamed the Chinese Government for being tough and stubborn.

It is found that *Sing Pao* continued to frame the story in terms of conflicts and tensions in the beginning of this stage. As a continuation of the "tension frame", the *People's Daily* editorial on April 26 was reported by *Sing Pao* as a hint of high-handed suppression. The tension was highlighted in the headline of the story:

"The CCP issued tough warning against student demonstrations; Unhappy Beijing students feared to be prelude of arrests."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Sing Pao*, April 26, 1989.



*Sing Pao* did not carry the full text of the editorial but dedicated most part of the story to the tension theme. According to *Sing Pao*, students in Beijing were very nervous about the situation:

.....University students in Beijing were afraid that the editorial was a hint that the government would start arresting students shortly. Student sources said that a lot of plain cloth policemen were found in the campuses. Some students had been followed ( by detectives ). It was also suspected that there were undercover detectives in student organizations. The 38th regiment of the People's Liberation Army, originally stationed in Hebei, was also called into the Capital. The atmosphere in university campuses is tense and uncomfortable.....

The special attention to the tense atmosphere was found to be quite unique in *Sing Pao*. *Ming Pao*, on the other hand, reported the students only as saying that " it was a severe political struggle " <sup>24</sup> without going any further.

In fact, *Ming Pao* seemed to have given up the "tension frame" since the publishing of the April 26 *People's Daily* editorial. Like the leftist press, instead, it shown an inclination to adopt a "problem-solving approach", playing up "sensible" rather than "radical" elements of the movement.

On April 26, *Ming Pao* carried a report on students trying to appeal for support. Although it was reported in the lead of the story that " a lot of people donated money to support the students", it was another theme that was stressed in the headline:

" Workers said they would not go on strike to support the students."

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> *Ming Pao*, April 26, 1989.



On the same day, *Ming Pao* also reported exclusively that the Students' Union of the Shenzhen University had expressed "reservations" towards class boycott. The story was not found in all other sampled newspapers, not even in the leftist press.

"Peacefulness" rather than "tension" was the theme of *Ming Pao's* coverage on the two marches in Beijing on April 27 and May 4. *Ming Pao's* report on the April 27 march that, contrary to reports in the first stage, the newspaper was now more interested in harmony than conflict. This theme was stressed in the first sentence of the story:

The biggest spontaneous student march in Communist China since its birth forty years ago took place peacefully as both the students and the police had exercised high degree of self-restraint.<sup>25</sup>

In fact, peacefulness was the theme not only found in the lead but throughout the whole story in *Ming Pao*. Instead of describing in detail how students broke through police blockades, the *Ming Pao* reporter had concentrated his effort in portraying the "harmony" among the students, the police and the Beijing citizens:

...The traffic came to a standstill as the students marched by. However, nobody was complaining about this. Those who were caught in the jam were happy to have witnessed such a march.

...The enthusiasm and unity of the students also dissolved the commitment of the policemen to their assignments....Although most policemen still looked serious, a number of their colleagues had applauded to the students. Some of them even shook hands with the people.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Ming Pao*, April 28, 1989.

<sup>26</sup> *Ming Pao*, April 28, 1989.



It can be argued that "peacefulness" was actually the characteristic of the march. *Ming Pao* simply had it reflected in its report. This is true. But let us see how *Sing Pao* handled the story. Still adopting the "tension" frame, the march was reported by *Sing Pao* as taking place in "extremely tense atmosphere" and was "lucky" not to have serious confrontations.<sup>27</sup> Five of the seven paragraphs of the story described how students broke through police barricades time after time. There were several times, according to *Sing Pao*, that it was very close to violence. Even when the march ended peacefully, it was described by *Sing Pao* as being lucky "to avoid the once imminent bloody suppression".<sup>28</sup>

The May 4 march was also framed differently between *Ming Pao* and *Sing Pao*. "Peacefulness" was again stressed by *Ming Pao* while covering the march on May 4. The theme was highlighted in the headline of the story:

The grand march on May 4 ended peacefully. Students go back to class today.<sup>29</sup>

In the lead of the story, the *Ming Pao* reporter concluded that the marchers were not "seriously obstructed" by the police.<sup>30</sup> He also reported that the May 4 march was even "smoother" than the previous one on April 27.<sup>31</sup>

*Sing Pao*, on the other hand, still framed the march within the context of tension and confrontation. Instead of stressing the march as taking

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<sup>27</sup> *Sing Pao*, April 28, 1989.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ming pao*, May 5, 1989.

<sup>30</sup> *Ming Pao*, May 5, 1989.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*



place in peace, *Sing Pao* reported in the lead of the story that there had been "fierce confrontations" nothing "unhappy" had happened.<sup>32</sup> Like reporting the previous march, *Sing Pao* showed a deep interest in describing how the students broke through police blockades time after time.<sup>33</sup>

However, like the leftist press, it is found that both *Sing Pao* and *Ming Pao* shifted its frame on the movement after the government showed no intention to open dialogue with the students to end the hunger strike. Reporting the march on May 17, both newspapers emphasised the huge support the students won and blamed the government of procrastinating the resolution of the crisis.

Like the leftist press, both *Ming Pao* and *Sing Pao* stressed the popularity of the movement in the headline of the story:

*Ming Pao*: Holding banners written "millions of soldiers and civilians with one heart"; workers and the liberation army joined the march.<sup>34</sup>

*Sing Pao*: The Beijing pro-democracy movement seethed with excitement; Farmers and workers actively involved.<sup>35</sup>

Although the two commercial newspapers differed in framing the two previous marches, they showed remarkable resemblance in reporting this one. The tone of the story, usually set in the first few paragraphs, was almost identical in the two papers:

*Ming Pao*: Over one million people from all walks of life took to the

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<sup>32</sup> *Sing Pao*, May 5, 1989.

<sup>33</sup> The area of the march story in *Sing Pao* is 23 sq. inches. Out of it, 59.75% ( 13.5 sq. inches) is on confrontations. *Ming Pao*, allocates only 13.63 % ( 3/22 sq. inches ) to this theme.

<sup>34</sup> *Ming Pao*, May 18, 1989.

<sup>35</sup> *Sing Pao*, May 18, 1989



streets yesterday to express their concern and support for the students. They have written a new chapter in the Chinese history.

Those who joined the march included workers, farmers, intellectuals, journalists and party cadres working in government bodies. The most special among them are over one thousand soldiers of the People's Liberation Army.

Some cadres working in the Foreign Ministry said the government had advised them not to take part in the march. But they maintained that modern Chinese people should no longer meekly submit to oppression and no longer silent.

*Sing Pao:*

Over one million people took to the streets on Wednesday. Those took part in the march came from all walks of life including workers, farmers, intellectuals, journalists, employees of government bodies and even primary school students.

Over one thousand staff of the General Logistic Department of the PLA also joined the march.

The marchers, holding various banners and flags, sang and shouted for democracy and freedom on the way. They composed a moving scene.

( Two paragraphs describing the details of the banners)

Among the marchers were workers from different factories and members of the official Chinese Workers' Union. They said that it was no longer time to remain silent .....

Like the leftist press, the enthusiasm of the mass to take part in the movement was seen by the commercial papers as due to the stubbornness of the Chinese government. *Ming Pao* stressed this point clearly in a feature story the same day. Calling the movement a "bitter gourd" to the Chinese government, the writer clearly blamed the authorities for allowing the crisis to develop:

" The government should have swallowed the bitter seeds last week. It refused. Now, they have to swallow a huge bitter gourd." These are remarks made by a professor when he witnessed the big rally on May 18.

....The number of slogans and banners criticizing Chinese leaders increased significantly in yesterday's march. The number and the directness of these slogans



were striking. ...The people held these banners because they were angry at the government's reluctance to meet the students. Everywhere in Beijing, you can hear people criticizing the government as "irresponsible", "rather died than admitting its mistakes"...

The story ended with these remarks:

According to a scholar of the Chinese Institute of Social Science, the more stubborn the Chinese authorities is, the later they cast off the label of "rioters" on the students; the greater the loss it has to face. He said, " I agree with one of banners appeared in the march. It said: The anchor of this country is rotten and needs immediate repair. Cut deep into bones to remove the virus before it is too late. If the leaders are still reluctant to meet with the students, the student movement will develop into a massive anti-government movement."<sup>36</sup>

#### 7.4 The Rightist press

As expected, the *Hong Kong Times* stuck to its anti-Communist stance in this stage. The three marches during this period were framed by the *Times* as people's resistance against communist rule.

As a result of the "anti-Communist" frame, the *People's Daily* editorial on April 26 was portrayed in a negative way by the *Times*. We have pointed out that the leftist papers and *Ming Pao* did not care much about the students' reaction to the editorial. *Sing Pao*, on the other hand, stressed only the tension of the situation. The *Times*, adopting a totally different approach, interpreted the editorial completely from the student's angle.

Unlike *Sing Pao* which reported that the students feared to be suppressed, the *Times* stressed in the headline of the story that the editorial was "obviously the prelude of iron fist suppression", and that "the students dismissed

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<sup>36</sup> *Ming Pao*, May 18, 1989.



it (the editorial) as wrongly labelling them." <sup>37</sup> The story did not carry much of the editorial but mostly the angry reactions from the students. This was highlighted in the lead of the story:

The CCP issued a strongly worded statement on Tuesday, accusing the student movement of being a "severe political struggle" against the Party and against socialism. Students leaders called a press conference at once. They asked the authorities to withdraw the "anti-Party label". The confrontation between the students and the Party was sharpened. The atmosphere was very tense.

Instead of reporting the students fear of arrests, the *Times* story quoted a student as saying "they dare not (arrest anybody). There are too many of us."

The march on April 27 was also reported under this theme. The *Times* did not stress the "peacefulness" (as in *Ming Pao*) nor the "tension" (as in *Sing Pao*). Instead, it praised the students' courage to stand up against threats of suppression in the headline of the story:

"Prepared to sacrifice themselves in bloodshed to fight for democracy and freedom; 150 thousand students marched in Beijing; millions of people cheered them on the way." <sup>38</sup>

The march was framed by the *Times* within the same context:

Ignoring the stern warnings and suppressions of the communist authorities, 150 thousand students from over 40 universities in Beijing broke through police blockades time after time and triumphantly marched to the Tiananmen Square. The students were supported by one million people who cheered them on the way. Students declared after the triumph that the class boycott will go on. They are considering to hold another big demonstration on the 70th anniversary of the May 4 movement.

...A student leader proudly declared through loudspeakers, "We

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<sup>37</sup> *Hong Kong Times*, April 26, 1989.

<sup>38</sup> *Hong Kong Times*, April 28, 1989.



have made history today. The history will not forget us. The people will not forget us." <sup>39</sup>

It can be seen that the march was interpreted by the *Times* as the victory of the people's power to resist communist suppression. Adopting a similar theme, the march on May 4 was reported by the *Times* as a united effort of Chinese people all over the world to protest against Communist dictatorship. This theme was clearly spelled out in the lead of the story:

Science and democracy once again became the goal of the Beijing students seventy years after the May 4 Movement. Their struggle was supported by Chinese students all over the world.

150 thousand students made a solemn statement in the Tiananmen Square. In the meantime, students in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, Shanghai, Xian, Changsha, Wuhan, Honolulu, Boston, Chicago and Paris also hold rallies to press the CCP to speed up political reform. They also ask the communist to value knowledge and science.

In order to highlight the anti-Communist theme, the *Times* reporter skilfully linked the march up with the portrait of Dr. Sun Yatsen erected in the Tiananmen Square:

In Beijing, 150 students held a large rally in front of the portrait of Dr. Sun Yatsen, the founder of the Republic of China. They read out the May 4 Manifesto, vowing to carry on with the May 4 spirit to fight for democracy, science, human rights and a good legal system.

.....A student leader made a speech at the beginning of the rally. He pointed out that the aim of the rally was to mark the 70th anniversary of the May 4 Movement as well as to protest against the government for suppressing student movement. He quoted a famous saying from Dr. Sun, "The revolution is not yet accomplished; comrades, keep on fighting." <sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> *Times*, May 5, 1989.



The march on May 17 was again reported by the *Times* within an anti-government framework. Apart from stressing the participation of cadres and soldiers as other newspapers did, the *Times* played up the anti-government sentiments among the demonstrators. This was highlighted in the headline of the *Times* story:

"Three million workers, farmers, soldiers and students marched in Beijing; Echoes of shouts for the resignation of Deng Xiaoping and Li Peng rang through the sky." <sup>41</sup>

Unlike the commercial newspapers which concentrated on describing how the march was supported by workers and soldiers, the *Times* used the first few paragraphs of the story to report the anti-government slogans in the march:

(The third paragraph) As the top communist leaders dare not face the students and refused to withdraw the April 26 *People's Daily* editorial, the Beijing people has demonstrated their discontent to the authorities, especially to Deng Xiaoping.

The Beijing College of Coal Mining asked the authorities to "stop the policy of killing people without a knife". The Chinese Medical Institute claimed that "those who refuse to rescue the dying students should be condemned". Workers from the Capital Steel Mill said that "it is stupid to enrage the mass."

There are also slogans pointing at Deng Xiaoping such as.....(Descriptions of the slogans go on for two paragraphs).

It can be seen that the *Times* has singled out the challenge to the Communist regime as the major theme of the movement at this stage.

## 7.5 Summary

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<sup>41</sup> *Times*, May 18.



In short, there was a gradual convergency in the framing of the movement by different newspapers during this stage. All sampled newspapers blamed the government for not responding positively to the students demands. One important development during this stage was the deviation of the leftist papers from the official line. They joined the commercial papers in supporting the students in their reports. However, both the leftist and the commercial papers were not ready to put too much emphasis on the anti-government sentiments among the people. The *Hong Kong Times* was still the only newspaper which played up this theme during this stage.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### CONSENSUS IN CRISIS: THE THIRD STAGE

#### 8.1 Key Events During the Third Stage ( May 19 to June 8 )

- May 19 Premier Li Peng addressed ten thousand cadres in Beijing. He announced that troops had been called into Beijing to "restore the order of the capital. Hundreds of thousands of Beijing citizens blocked the roads around Beijing to stop the troops from moving in.
- May 20 Martial law was imposed on the city of Beijing.
- May 21 One million people marched in Hong Kong to support the Beijing students.
- June 3 Troops succeeded in entering Beijing.
- June 4 Troops recaptured the Tiananmen Square by force, firing at civilians and student who tried to stop them.

#### 8.2 Framing The Crisis

This was the crisis stage. As predicted by our hypothesis, personal inclinations of the journalists became a more important factor in framing the movement. As a result, different types of newspapers, regardless of their different political background, converged in the framing of the situation during this stage. The massacre on June 4 was seriously condemned by all newspapers regardless of their organizational interests. To avoid redundancy, I just quote some most illustrating examples below.

##### A. The Martial Law



Li Peng's speech on May 19 was the prelude of the imposition of martial law one day later. In order to indicate their disapproval of Li Peng's speech, all the sampled newspapers reported the people's resistance in a prominent and positive way:

*Ta Kung:*

" At about eleven o'clock, people knew that the troops was going to move in. They went to the streets one after another. There were crowds of people standing all along Changan Avenue, discussing about the situation. They blocked the road in order to stop the troops from moving in. The people remarked, "the students are also "lao bai sing" (ordinary people)." Saying this, they sighed in despondency.

...More and more people gathered around . They were enraged by Li Peng's speech. A student of the Central College of Crafts and Arts said, "The student movement cannot be separated from the support by people in Beijing and the whole China. Government leaders, no matter who they are, cannot go against the interest of the people. If they do that, it will not be accepted by the people. The people must support and protect the students."<sup>1</sup>

*Wen Wei:*

" An old lady said to the soldiers in tears, " If you insist in moving in to 'clear up' the students, I will lie under the wheels of your truck."

..People crowded in the street and shouted rhythmically, " PLA loves the people; hold the trucks, protect the students," Some of them shouted so loudly that they cracked their voice.<sup>2</sup>

*Ming Pao:*

" Beijing citizens went to the streets spontaneously after having listened to the speech of Li Peng. They waited at the main access to the city to block the incoming troops. Hundreds of army trucks were trapped within crowds of people all night. Students as well as ordinary citizens, in tears, urged the soldiers to refrain from going to suppress the students.

..At Gong Zhu Fuan, many people, led by an old lady, lay down on the road when army trucks approached. A woman climbed up one of the trucks and shouted to the soldiers. " Kids, do not do

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<sup>1</sup> *Ta Kung Pao*, May 20, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> *Wen Wei Pao*, May 20, 1989.



anything to harm the students. Don't be a criminal in history."<sup>3</sup>

*Sing Pao:* Troops approached the city of Beijing in all directions this morning. In Tiananmen Square, two hundred thousand students and countless supporters have already prepared for a tougher challenge to come.<sup>4</sup>

*Times:* ... Women lay down on the roads. They said that the army trucks had to run over their bodies to move on. Some people even cut the tyre of the trucks with knives. ....The people shouted, " people's army do not beat up the people". The atmosphere was both tense and moving.<sup>5</sup>

All these reports emphasised one point: the decision to mobilize troops against the students was unrighteous. All citizens in Beijing were on the side of the students. These people, among them many were women and old men, were prepared to sacrifice even their lives to protect the students. The message conveyed by these reports needs no further elaboration.

This theme also applied to reports on the following day, when martial law was formally imposed. Reporting the situation of the Chinese capital under martial law the first time in forty years, all of the five sampled newspapers concentrated on how the people were determined to resist the disreputable move. This theme was highlighted in the headline on page one:

*Ta Kung:* Workers formed death squad to protect the students.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Ming Pao*, May 21, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> *Sing Pao*, May 20, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> *Hong Kong Times*, May 30, 1989.

<sup>6</sup> *Ta Kung Pao*, May 21, 1989.



- Wen Wei:* The people were angry about the martial law; hundreds of thousands of citizens stopping troops.<sup>7</sup>
- Ming Pao:* Millions gathered at Tiananmen Square despite threats of suppression.
- Sing Pao:* Martial law imposed in Beijing; The students and the people vowed to fight to the very end.
- Times:* All the people vowed to protect the students with their bodies.

The attitude of the Hong Kong press towards the situation may be best summed up in a feature story of *Wen Wei Pao* on May 20. Summing up the recent developments, the *Wen Wei* reporter wrote:

"It was found in recent days that the student movement had won popular support among the people. The will of the people was very clear. This is why we found tens of hundreds of people blocking the roads in order to keep the troops out of Beijing. These scenes were moving. Is calling in the troops something the people want? Does it accord with the demands of the people? This is what should be seriously thought about."<sup>8</sup>

#### B. The Marches

One million people marched in Hong Kong on May 21 to support the Beijing students. No significant difference can be detected in different types of newspapers. All five samples newspapers agree that the theme of the march was two-fold: to protest over the imposition of martial law and to demand Premier Li Peng to step down.

The commercial papers also did not hesitate in reporting the anti-LI Peng sentiment in the march. Describing the rally as "millions of people

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<sup>7</sup> *Wen Wei Pao*, May 21, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> *Wen Wei Pao*, 1989



shouting in anger", <sup>9</sup> *Ming Pao* reported in the lead of the story that the "Happy Valley Stadium became the historical venue in which Hong Kong people expressed their support for the Beijing students and shouted their demands for Li Peng to step down." <sup>10</sup> *Sing Pao* , on the other hand, started the story with the headline " The largest ever march in HK; People shouted , 'Li Peng step down'." <sup>11</sup> The anti-Li sentiment was highlighted. The rightist *Hong Kong Times* had played up the anti-government elements of the movement from the beginning. It did the same this time. What is interesting is that the *Times'* headline and story was not more "anti-Communist" than the commercial papers anymore. <sup>12</sup>

The two leftist papers also did not hesitate to report slogans and speeches criticizing and humiliating Li Peng in the story. *Wen Wei Pao*, for example, quoted a speaker as saying " if Li Peng still has some senses, he should knee down before the portrait of the late Premier Zhou Enlai, his step father. The only thing Li Peng can do is to resign." <sup>13</sup> *Ta Kung Pao*, apart from reporting anti-Li criticisms, published a photograph of a blind man holding a banner written " Li Peng, what are you talking about ?". <sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Ming Pao*, May 22, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> *Sing Pao*, May 22, 1989.

<sup>12</sup> The headline of the *Times'* story was: " Millions of students and citizens marched to Happy Valley; support the Beijing students; Down with Li Peng." The story started with these descriptions: Millions of Hong Kong people took to the streets to support the Beijing students. They shouted, " down with Li Peng" and "no suppression". Tens of thousands of citizens cheered them on the way. They applauded as the people marched by." ( *Hong Kong Times*, may 20 ).

<sup>13</sup> *Wen Wei Pao* , May 22, 1989.

<sup>14</sup> *Ta Kung Pao*, may 22, 1989.



Yet, unlike the commercial and the rightist papers, Neither *Tai Kung* nor *Wen Wei* stressed it in the headline. Nevertheless, the reservations of the leftist press, if there was still any, totally disappeared two days later. Reporting another huge rally in Beijing on May 23, both *Wen Wei* and *Ta Kung* stressed the demands for Li Peng to resign as the major goal of the march. This theme was spelled out in the headlines without reservations this time:

*Ta Kung*: Staff of central government organs joined the march; concentrating on asking Li Peng to step down.<sup>15</sup>

*Wen Wei*: Millions of people marched in Beijing demanding Li Peng to step down.<sup>16</sup>

Interestingly, the headline of the ultra-right *Times* was almost the same:

" Millions of civilians marched in Beijing; demanding the abolition of martial law; unanimously asked Li Peng to resign." <sup>17</sup>

### C. The Massacre

PLA troops eventually broke through the blockades of the people on the night June 3. They fired at civilians on their way and succeeded in recovering the Tiananmen Square before the dawn of June 4. All Hong Kong newspapers, regardless of their background, unanimously condemned the massacre in their editorials. In their reports, they did not refrain themselves from making their stands known.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ta Kung Pao*, May 24, 1989.

<sup>16</sup> *Wen Wei Pao*, May 24, 1989.

<sup>17</sup> *Hong Kong Times*, May 24, 1989.



### Ta Kung

Headline: Bloodshed in Tiananmen Square; A Rare Tragedy Since this Republic was Founded.

This Day Will Be Long Remembered in History. People Burst into Tears as They Saw the Horrifying Scene. The People Can't Help Asking: Who Has Betrayed the People?

Story: The Chinese Liberation Army, supported by armoured vehicles and strong fire power, overcame students and citizens who did not have any weapons. The troops recover the Tiananmen Square and forced the people out of the square of the people. <sup>18</sup>

### Wen Wei

Headline: Tragedy In The Capital Amid The 40th Anniversary of the Republic: Troops Fired Fiercely To Force Their Way To The Tiananmen Square. The Blood of Hundreds of People Dyed the Ten Mile Long Changan Avenue in Red.

Story: Forty years since the liberation of China, the Chinese Army fired at civilians for the first time last night. It was known that at least 35 people were killed and over two hundred were injured. <sup>19</sup>

### Ming Pao

Headline: The Mass Was Bloodily Suppressed by the Army; Over Three Thousand Were Killed or Injured In Army Shootout.

Story: Li Peng Government yesterday ordered the troops to invade the Tiananmen Square. The army kept firing at the people. Countless civilians were hit by bullets. Both extremely angry and sad, the people severely condemned the government. <sup>20</sup>

### Sing Pao

Headline: Totally Inhuman. Bloody Massacre. Armoured Vehicles Rushing Through. Soldiers Shooting Crazy. The People Fell One By One.

Story: Tens of thousands of soldiers last night invaded the Tiananmen Square from all directions, firing at civilians who stood in their way. The government has promised that there will not be bloodshed. But now, at

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<sup>18</sup> *Ta Kung Pao*, June 4, 1989.

<sup>19</sup> *Wen Wei Pao*, June 4, 1989.

<sup>20</sup> *Ming Pao*, June 4, 1989.



least thirty people were killed; several hundreds were injured....The dead and the injured lay all over the centre of Beijing. People rushed for life. It was just like a battlefield.<sup>21</sup>

### Times

Headline: The Communist Army Recovered the Square by Killing; The People Tried Their Best To Stop The Troops; Over Two Hundred were killed or Injured.

Story: ...When the army intruded into the Square, the student broadcaster urged the people in the Square to stay calm. One student said, "The government is trying to kill unarmed civilians in the Square. We have a government comparable to that of Hitler."<sup>22</sup>

One can fairly argue that all Hong Kong newspapers interpreted the situation in a similar way simply because they were all reporting the same fact. However, the facts can be interpreted in a totally different way:

(Xinhua, Beijing, June 4) According to a spokesman of the People's Liberation Army, the situation in Beijing had gone worse since yesterday. The riot instigated by a small number of people has turned into a counter-revolutionary insurrection. The army, back up by Beijing citizens and workers, has adopted decisive measures to suppress the revolt. At about five o'clock this morning, troops were stationed in the Square. The students and other people in the Square were evacuated.<sup>23</sup>

### D. After The Massacre

"Brutality" and "instability" were the two major themes of the Hong Kong press in reporting the situation in China. Chinese soldiers were described as barbarians who killed with no regrets. At the same time, any signs that indicated the instability of the Chinese leadership were given prominent coverage.

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<sup>21</sup> *Sing Pao*, June 4, 1989.

<sup>22</sup> *Hong Kong Times*, June 4, 1989.

<sup>23</sup> *The People's Daily*, June 5, 1989.



Again, it is found that this approach was adopted by all the five sampled newspapers regardless of their different interests.

All five sampled newspapers carried detail descriptions of the "barbaric act" of the Chinese soldiers. The following are the most outstanding examples from each of the five newspapers:

Ta Kung

... From the morning to the afternoon, every half an hour, every hour, shots of machine guns can be heard. We can see from a highrise post that more people were hit and carried away after each round of bullets...

.....Soldiers fired at civilians casually when they passed by the flyover at Fuxinmen. An old lady tried to cover herself up behind the columns under the flyover. The inhuman soldiers did not let her live. After a few shots, the old lady died. Her body was badly ruined by bullets.

....The students that stayed in the Square were the poorest. A girl was shot over thirty times. Another girl challenged the army by vowing to stay. The soldiers shot at her feet. She fell down and stood up again. This time she had seven bullets in her chest. Other students wanted to drag her body back. They were also shot dead by the army.<sup>24</sup>

Wen Wei

...those who gathered as a crowd or walked near the army will be killed without being warned. The soldiers were killing as if they were mad.

....An old man was shot at the temple when he tried to approach the troops.

.... People noticed that some soldiers looked strange in their faces. They sang when they were shooting. Some soldiers laughed when someone was shot and fell down.<sup>25</sup>

Ming Pao

... According to some witnesses, some soldiers acted like they had taken drugs. They smiled satisfactorily after shooting the people.

.....Somebody witnessed a three-year old boy being killed by a

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<sup>24</sup> *Ta Kung*, June 5, 1989.

<sup>25</sup> *Wen Wei Pao*, June 5, 1989.



soldier with bayonet. He was believed to be the youngest victim of the massacre.

*Sing Pao:* .....An intellectual in Beijing told us that the soldiers were just like mad dogs. They fired at anyone they saw.

According to the witness, a girl was killed when she stopped her bicycle in order to let the army trucks drive by.

....a nine-year old boy was shot nine times. His mother showed his body to the troops.<sup>26</sup>

*Times:* ....Now the soldiers were obsessed with killing. They beat up everyone they saw. They killed every one they saw.

...Doctors and nurses tried to save the lives of those who were dying. They cried and shouted. The soldiers replied not with words but with bullets.<sup>27</sup>

The politics in China was reported by the Hong Kong press within a framework of instability during this period. Stories which implied unsteadiness were given special weight. One illustrating example was the report on June 6 that different camps of troops were reported to have clashed in Beijing. All the sampled newspapers interpreted the clash as indications of serious instability in the army and in the leadership of China, as shown clearly in the following headlines:

*Ta Kung:* The army splits over the suppression. Troops exchanged fire at the southern suburb of Beijing.

*Wen Wei:* The truth of blood awakened part of the troops. Troops exchanged fire at the suburb of Beijing. Sounds of Cannons and guns continued. Soldiers rather die than obey. Serious divergency in the army.

*Ming Pao:* Mutiny in Beijing. Firing At each other. The 27th Corps besieged by four other corps. Vowing for a bloody revenge.

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<sup>26</sup> *Sing Pao*, June 5, 1989.

<sup>27</sup> *Hong Kong Times*, June 5, 1989.



*Sing Pao*: Two groups of troops fought fiercely at the suburb of Beijing. China edging towards civil war.

*Times*: Serious struggle in the army and the government of the CCP. The Mainland on the brink of civil war.

There were other reports that reflected the "instability frame" during the period. *Ming Pao*, for example, reported as the lead story on June 6 that Li Peng was shot. On the same day, it also reported "unconfirmed information" that Deng Xiaoping had died. *Wen Wei* quoted some provincial authorities in China as saying that they "do not know who is in charge."<sup>28</sup> The *Times* reported that the commanders of the garrisons in Shenyang and Nanjing tried to persuade troops in Chengdu to rebel. Other newspapers also did the same. The *Oriental Daily News* and the *Express* reported on June 6 that Deng Xiaoping had died. The *Express*, on the following day, reported that Li Peng had fled to Mongolia. All these reports were dismissed later.

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<sup>28</sup> *Wen Wei Pao*, June 6.



## CHAPTER NINE

### RETURN TO NORMALCY: THE FOURTH STAGE

The public appearance of Deng Xiaoping on June gradually cleared up the political uncertainty in China. Step by step, the Chinese government restored the social and political of the country. Since then, the Hong Kong press gradually reverted to the routine mode of news framing. Organizational interests once again became the major factor. As a result, the five sampled newspapers went on separate ways again in reporting the student movement and the massacre.

#### 9.1 The Leftist press

##### *Ta Kung Pao*

*Ta Kung Pao* was the first among the five newspapers in reverting to its routine stand. The first hint could be found as early as June 10, the day just after Deng appeared on TV. Reporting Deng's public appearance, *Ta Kung Pao* simply printed the Xinhua dispatch without offering its own interpretation. The headline of the story was rather neutral comparing to other newspapers:

" Deng Xiaoping appeared in Beijing yesterday. He urged to calmly think about the past and the future. " <sup>1</sup>

No reference to the June 4 massacre can be found in *Ta Kung's* headline. Compare it to the headline of *Wen Wei*, another leftist paper:

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<sup>1</sup> *Ta Kung Pao* , June 10, 1989.



" Not mentioning the killing of civilians but praised the heroes in the army. Deng appeared yesterday claiming 'revolt' suppressed. Open door policy and reform said 'to be unchanged.'" <sup>2</sup>

In fact, *Ta Kung Pao* was the only newspaper in Hong Kong which based its report of Deng's appearance solely on the official account of Xinhua. Most other newspapers offered their own interpretations of the story, which were primarily of two themes. Some viewed it as a symbol that Deng was in tight control and did not oppose to the massacre. <sup>3</sup> Others paid attention to the absence of Zhao Ziyang and Hu Qili. <sup>4</sup>

On the next day ( June 11 ), *Ta Kung*, like other newspapers, published the transcript of a taped speech of Cai Lin, a prominent student leader. Miss Cai accused the soldiers as "fascist" and "inhuman". *Ta Kung* reported these remarks but omitted the following:

"...The puppet central government led by Yang Shangkun, Li Peng, Wang Zhen and Bo Yibo is counting its last days. Down with fascists. Down with military leadership. The people must win. Long live the republic."

These radical remarks were fully reproduced in all other four sampled newspapers except *Ta Kung*.

The televised speech of Wu'er Kaixi, another student leader was edited in a similar way by *Ta Kung*. The speech was the first concrete evidence that Wu'er, a popular figure in Hong Kong, escaped from China. It was a major story in all the sampled newspapers except *Ta Kung Pao*. *Ta Kung* put the news

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<sup>2</sup> *Wen Wei Pao*, June 10, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. *Sing Pao*, *Ming Pao*, *South China Morning Post*, the *Hong Kong Standard*.

<sup>4</sup> The *Hong Kong Times*, *Wen Wei*, *Ming Pao*.



only in the lower part of the first page. The transcript was printed in page four, omitting these sensitive remarks:

"... The counter-revolutionary warlords, the counter-revolutionary government and the fascist army led and directed by Li Peng and Yang Shangkun and orchestrated by Deng Xiaoping...

...counter-revolutionary warlords like Deng Xiaoping, Li Peng and Yang Shangkun. They are fascists. They are animals...They will face the trial of history."

It should be pointed out that, however, the return of *Ta Kung Pao* to the Party line was not sudden. For a period of time, *Ta Kung Pao* did not completely give up its framing of the incident, as righteous movement brutally suppressed by the government. This attitude was still reflected in the treatment of news for some time. One of the examples was the government's announcement on June 13 of a wanted list of 21 students. Clearly indicating its protest, *Ta Kung Pao* contradicted the announcement with the government's previous promise of not arresting students:

" The promise of not arresting students not yet forgotten. Beijing issued a nationwide warrant to arrest 21 students."

Instead of reporting the wanted list in the lead of the story, the *Ta Kung* report started:

People in Hong Kong were surprised when they heard the news that Beijing wanted to arrest 21 student leaders. They pointed out that the government had promised not to arrest the students not long ago. They were puzzled by the new announcement.<sup>5</sup>

The remarks of Mr. Yuan Mu, the spokesman of the State Council,

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<sup>5</sup> *Ta Kung*, June 14, 1989.



on June 17 was treated in a similar way by *Ta Kung Pao*. Yuan said that no one was killed in Tiananmen Square and that the "counter-revolutionary revolt" was supported by someone in the top leadership. In the headline of the story, *Ta Kung Pao* called these remarks "amazing" and "astonishing".<sup>6</sup>

However, *Ta Kung* did not stand by this line for very long before it completely shifted its frame and followed the official line again. On July 6, Xinhua News Agency carried a full report of Chen Xitong, the mayor of Beijing, on the suppression of the student. The report was the official account on the what had happened in China since April 1989. It continued to label the movement as a conspiracy to overthrow the communist regime and accused that Zhao Ziyang was behind it. It was obvious that these allegations went strongly against *Ta Kung's* own interpretation. This time, however, *Ta Kung* did nothing about it. It printed the Xinhua dispatch in full as the lead story of the day without trying to balance or contradict it with other reports. The official accusations like "counter-revolutionary revolts" were no longer put in quotation marks. The government accusations were legitimized by the way it was reported in *Ta Kung Pao*.<sup>7</sup>

### Wen Wei Pao

*Wen Wei Pao* showed no sign of turning around in June and early July. One illustrating example was its report on the march in Hong Kong on July 4, one month after the massacre in Beijing. The march was covered in detail as the lead local story of the day. Sensitive criticisms against Chinese leaders were

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<sup>6</sup> *Ta Kung Pao*, June 17, 1989.

<sup>7</sup> *Ta Kung Pao*, July 7, 1989.



still reported in detail in *Wen Wei*:

" Mr. Lee Wing Tat (member of the group organizing the march) urged Chinese people all over the world not to forget the June 4 massacre. He condemned the Chinese government for killing and arresting people who took part in the pro-democracy movement. He said that Chinese people are at the peak of their anger. One day the whole population will take to the street to fight against the brutal regime." <sup>8</sup>

These remarks were not found in *Ta Kung Pao*. Instead they were summed up by *Ta Kung Pao* like this:

" Leaders of the Alliance ( the organizer of the march ) like Szeto Wah, Lau Chin Shek and Cheung Man Kwong spoke one after another. They instigated other people to chase after the prime culprit of the Beijing incident."

However, following the dismissal of publisher Li Zisong on July 14 <sup>9</sup>, *Wen Wei* also began to shift its stand. On July 15, *Wen Wei*, for the first time since June 4, used the term " the June 4 incident" instead of "massacre" or "bloody suppression". From then on, news that were unfavourable to the Chinese government were relatively played down.( e.g. the formation the Alignment of All Hong Kong People in Support of a Democratic China on July 17; the call to boycott the Asian Games on July 23 ). Like *Ta Kung*, the return of *Wen Wei* to the Party line was gradual but steady. Yet, it became all clear on October 2 when it reported the anti-Beijing demonstrations in Hong Kong on the anniversary day of the PRC. The story was only placed in page 11 ( all other sampled newspapers except *Ta Kung* and *Wen Wei* put the story in page 1). The

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<sup>8</sup> *Wen Wei Pao*, July 5, 1989.

<sup>9</sup> Li Zisong was dismissed by NCNA for not willing to follow the Party line. The incident will be discussed in detail in the next chapter



story not only avoided labelling the Chinese leaders such as "old monsters"<sup>10</sup>, it also tried to trivialize the rally with the following 'facts':

"...The rally was due to commence on 3 pm and went on until 6.30 pm. But because of the poor turnout, the organizers had to wait half an hour before the rally can start..

....Before the rally, the reporter had asked some citizens in the Victoria Park if they would attend the demonstration. All of them said no. Among those who were willing to elaborate, most people thought that the anniversary day was a day to celebrate the birth of the country. The Alliance (the organizer of the rally) was wrong to organize such a rally on that day...

## 9.2 The Commercial Press

For a period of time after the June 4 massacre, the Chinese leaders were de-legitimized by both *Ming Pao* and *Sing Pao*. The official capacity of senior leaders, especially Li Peng and Yang Shangkun, was ignored. They were referred to as the "massacre clique" the "Li-Yang clique" or "those in power". The anti-Chinese government sentiment was also clearly indicated by the way they handled stories related to the suppression of the pro-democracy movement. On the day the Chinese authorities released a wanted list of 21 student leaders (June 14), for example, *Sing Pao's* lead story was Japan's condemnation of the massacre. By such treatment, the importance and legitimacy of the wanted list was played down. In fact, most of the international protests over the massacre were reported prominently on *Sing Pao* in June.

*Ming Pao*, on the other hand, indicated its stand clearly when it reported the report of Beijing Mayor Chen Xitong. The *Ming Pao* story about the report was supplemented by the reporter's interpretation:

"Chen Xitong's report concentrated at attacking those who supported the

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<sup>10</sup> *Ming Pao*, October 2, 1989.



student movement. He is especially interested in describing how 'counter-revolutionary rebels cruelly killed the soldiers'. However, he did not say a word about the massacre by the army."<sup>11</sup>

However, such explicit stand against the Chinese government gradually vanished in the two commercial papers. Two months later, when the Chinese government celebrated the 40th anniversary of the PRC, both *Ming Pao* and *Sing Pao* reported the ceremony in a "neutral" way without indicating their own stand. Although both newspapers emphasised that the ceremony was held under martial law, none of them "de-legitimize" the Chinese leadership anymore.

#### 9.4 Reporting the Anniversary under the Routine Mode

We have discussed the gradual frame shift of both the leftist and the commercial press above. The rightist press, on the other hand, showed no indication of modifying its hard-line attitude towards the communist regime. As a result, stories were again framed differently by different type of newspapers. One good example was the 40th anniversary of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1989.

The leftist newspapers reported the festival in a positive way. "Joyfulness" was the theme of their reports. This theme was indicated clearly in the headline of both *Ta Kung* and *Wen Wei*:

*Ta Kung*: "Big celebrations in Beijing last night. Millions of people celebrated joyfully."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Ming Pao*, July 7, 1987.

<sup>12</sup> *Ta Kung*, October 2, 1989.



Wen Wei: " Millions of people celebrated the anniversary of the PRC last night." <sup>13</sup>

Detail descriptions of firework and performance filled the whole report of the leftist papers. The people were reported to have "cheered with joy" during the fire work performance.

The atmosphere described by the commercial papers, however, was quite different. Both *Ming Pao* and *Sing Pao* stressed that it was the first time the PRC celebrated its anniversary under martial law. Both papers paid special attention to the tense atmosphere in Beijing. *Ming Pao*, for example, reported that extra safety measures were introduced during the performance:

" Because of the June 4 incident, the organizers worried about the safety measures very much. All performers had to abide by three regulations. First, only transparent plastic bags can be used. Second, cans and bottles are not allowed. Third, in case of unexpected events, all performers had to lie down immediately.."

*Sing Pao* also reported that " some policemen were equipped with anti-riot gears" and that " some policemen carried machine guns". These 'facts' were not found in the leftist papers.

Yet, the anniversary portrayed by the commercial papers was not quite the same with the one in the *Hong Kong Times*. Unlike the commercial papers which focused only on tensions, the *Times* directly contrasted the celebrations with the massacre:

" According to diplomats, the '40th anniversary of the communist regime was celebrated in loneliness because of the June 4 massacre. In Tiananmen Square, the hot spot of the student movement a few months ago, PLA soldiers played the song "Praise Our Country". There was also a firework performance. However, many of the friends of the CCP did not share this glorious moment.

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<sup>13</sup> *Wen Wei Pao*, October 2, 1989.



A western diplomat said, 'it is a bit awkward to sing and dance in this square.'...

....A Beijing citizen said that the shock of the June 4 massacre is not over yet. He said, 'if I ever come across Li Peng, I will stab him into pieces.'..."<sup>14</sup>

The comparisons above revealed how different newspapers framed these kinds of events after the crisis period. The leftist papers had returned completely to the party line. The commercial papers still offered their own interpretations, but refrained themselves from going too far. The authority of the present leadership of the Chinese government, although once called the "massacre clique", was fully recognized. The *Times*, standing firmly by its anti-Communist stance, still showed no hesitation in explicitly condemning the massacre. The consonance of the Hong Kong press during the crisis had come to an end.

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<sup>14</sup> *Hong Kong Times*, October 2, 1989.



## CHAPTER TEN

### THE NEWSROOM IN CRISIS: PERSONAL JUDGEMENT UNSUPPRESSED

The content analysis reported in the last four chapters illustrated an interesting pattern of news framing of the Hong Kong press during the 1989 pro-democracy movement in China. It is found that newspapers with different interests had approached the movement with different angles at the beginning. However, the differences vanished during the crisis stage but appeared again after the crisis was over.

It is hypothesized in this thesis that during the crisis, the journalists' personal attitude and judgement will become more important in news framing. Interviews of reporters and editors supported the hypothesis in the case of the leftist press and the commercial press. The case in the *Hong Kong Times* was however quite different.

#### 10.1 The Leftist press

##### Tight Control in Routine Times

In normal times, both *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Pao* are tightly controlled by Beijing to ensure what they publish are in line with the interest of the Chinese government. The control is exercised by the local branch of the New China News Agency by various means.

According to Tsang Tak Shing, the chief editor of *Ta Kung Pao*, NCNA seldom interferes with the daily operations of *Ta Kung* and *Wen Wei*. However, NCNA holds the decisive power of appointing the publisher and senior editing staff of the two ultra-leftist newspapers. These people are carefully



selected among those who are able to "toe the Party line".<sup>1</sup>

There is also always a "representative" of NCNA who holds a key editorial post (such as Deputy chief editor or Chief editor) in both papers.<sup>2</sup> Although their "official capacity" is never formally announced, nobody in the two newspapers doubt their authorities.<sup>3</sup> According to Li Zisong, the former publisher of *Wen Wei Pao*, these representatives frequently interfere with the editorial policy of the newspapers.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, a number of senior editorial staff in the editorial committee of both *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Pao* are members of the Communist Party. In terms of Party discipline, they have to obey the leadership of NCNA.<sup>5</sup> In *Wen Wei Pao*, for example, during the student movement last year, four out of the five members of the standing committee of the editorial committee were Communist Party members.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from these kinds of invisible control, it is known that there are regular briefings in the NCNA for the publishers and chief editors of both leftist papers to inform them of the Party line on specific issues. Information as such becomes a major factor of the chief editor's judgement. Sometimes, it is incorporated into the editorial policy which is made known to all reporters and

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Tsang Tak Shing, the chief editor of *Ta Kung Pao*, May 30, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> See Li Zisong, "Wind and Rain Started by Bureaucrats," *The Contemporary Magazine*, Dec. 16, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with a former senior reporter of *Wen Wei Pao*.

<sup>4</sup> Same as footnote 2.

<sup>5</sup> In the party hierarchy of the CCP, the Hong Kong branch of NCNA is actually the "Hong and Macau Working Committee" which plays the leading role among Communist Party members in Hong Kong. (See Chung Szemei, "How the CCP runs Hong Kong", the *Contemporary Magazine*, Nov. 25, 1989.)

<sup>6</sup> Interview with a former editor of *Wen Wei Pao*.



editors. A recent example was the treatment of news relating to the situation in Eastern Europe. The instruction was to "play it down".<sup>7</sup>

For the low ranking reporters and editors of the leftist papers, the organizational control is always more indirect. According to reporters in both *Ta Kung* and *Wen Wei* I interviewed, there is no explicit instruction that they must follow the party line when writing their stories. However, there is seldom any doubt. "You know what kind of newspapers they are before you join," remarks one *Ta Kung Pao* reporter. "After some time, you know what can be published and what cannot. You learn through daily work," he added. And the NCNA is never subtle in indicating its preference. It selects stories in different newspapers everyday and edits it into a pamphlet and sends it to all the leftist newspapers. "This is the billboard chart for us", said a former *Ta Kung Pao* reporter, "from the order of the stories we know what the NCNA prefers".

Both consciously and unconsciously, the reporters have followed the rule of the game. They gradually learn to avoid writing something which they think may be too sensitive. A *Ta Kung Pao* reporter cited the example of the reporting of the so-called "democrats" in Hong Kong. She said that most of the stories about them were edited into a short piece. Now, she just does not bother to write long stories about them.<sup>8</sup>

Tsang tak-shing, the chief editor of *Ta Kung Pao* stressed that there is no prior censorship in the leftist papers by NCNA.<sup>9</sup> This may be true. But with such a tight control, both visible and invisible, both direct and indirect, censorship

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<sup>7</sup> Confirmed in different interviews with reporters and editors both in *Ta Kung* and *Wen Wei*.

<sup>8</sup> Personal interview.

<sup>9</sup> Personal interview.



is almost unnecessary.

### Loosening of Control in Crisis

However, the tight control of NCNA over the content of the leftist papers was found to be paralysed during the student movement last year. The uncertainties of the situation made it difficult even for NCNA to fully grasp the development of the situation. According to He Mingsze, the former deputy general secretary of the NCNA, even Xu Jiatun, the NCNA director at that time, was not sure about what was really going on.<sup>10</sup>

As a result, NCNA was unable to give clear instructions. It is known that, shortly after the death of Hu Yaobang, NCNA had advised both leftist papers to "play down" the student movement.<sup>11</sup> However, as the situation became more tense and uncertain, NCNA gave no further advice.<sup>12</sup> The leftist papers were left on their own to interpret the situation.

"At that time, even NCNA did not know who was in power and what would happen next," said a former deputy chief editor of *Wen Wei Pao*, "how were they able to give us instructions?" Another *Wen Wei Pao* reporter said, "I believed that the regular links between the leftist press and NCNA was temporarily disconnected for a period of time."

As a result, the responsibility of "toeing the Party line" was left to the hands of the senior editorial staff of the leftist newspapers. However, they also lack the information to make their judgement. The chief editor of *Ta Kung Pao* admitted that "things looked strange since the *People's Daily* editorial on

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<sup>10</sup> He Mingsze, "High Ranking NCNA Official Commenting on Xu Jiatun," The Contemporary Magazine, May 19, 1990.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with a former deputy chief editor of *Wen Wei Pao*.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



April 26" but he "did not quite understand what was going on". Consequently, he did not give any specific instructions to his staff and even "depended on the information sent back by the reporters in Beijing to judge the situation". In *Wen Wei Pao*, the deputy publisher Chen Baojian, widely conceived as the representative of NCNA<sup>13</sup>, was absent in a number of editorial meetings during the period.<sup>14</sup> Publisher Li Zisong told his staff to "report it as what it is". The burden of defining the situation, then, was placed upon the journalists, both reporters and editors, who actually handled the story.

#### The Personal Involvement of Journalists during the Crisis

In the beginning stage of the student movement, reporters of the leftist press had also refrained from pushing their personal views too hard. One of the examples was Liu Ruishao, the then Beijing correspondent of *Wen Wei Pao*. According to Liu, he sympathised with the students ever since the movement unfolded and totally disagreed to the *People's Daily* editorial that labelled the movement as "riots". However, he could only criticize the editorial subtly in his story. The editorial was not even directly mentioned.<sup>15</sup>

"After all these years in Beijing I know the rule of the game very well," Liu said, "I know what can be accepted by the authorities."<sup>16</sup>

However, following the development of the movement, Liu could not help but be deeply involved. "The turning point was certainly the imposition of martial law on May 20," Liu said, "it reached a critical stage. You had to

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<sup>13</sup> Chen was a former vice-director of the NCNA.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with a former deputy chief editor of *Wen Wei Pao*.

<sup>15</sup> Liu's article was quoted in page 64 of this thesis.

<sup>16</sup> Personal interview.



choose between what is absolutely right and what is absolutely wrong."

Yung Wei Ling, the *Ta Kung Pao* reporter covering the movement, shared this view. "The students were staging a hunger strike. Many were sent to the hospital. Yet the government still refused to talk to them. Seeing this, you couldn't help taking a stand." Yung said. The stand, of course, was to support the students.

Both Liu Ruishao and Yung Wei Ling admitted that, although unconsciously, their strong personal feelings had "inevitably" affected the way they reported the news. Their explicit stance in the stories favourable to the students during the period was reinforced because it was not challenged by their editors in Hong Kong. Yung said that she was more confident when she saw that almost everything she wrote was printed, including sensitive criticisms against the Chinese leaders. In normal times, these criticisms stands "no chance at all" to be found in her newspapers. "That was the period I enjoy most freedom since I joined *Ta Kung Pao* in 1982," she said.

In fact, in the newsrooms of both *Wen Wei Pao* and *Ta Kung Pao* in Hong Kong, the emotion was also very high. Both newspapers sent telexes to Zhao Ziyang on May 18 and urged him to open dialogues with the students who had been hunger-striking for three days. On May 22, the staff of *Ta Kung Pao* joined the big rally in Hong Kong to support the students. Some of the *Wen Wei Pao* staff also joined the march in their personal capacity.

Even the major gatekeepers in the newsrooms were highly involved in the crisis. In *Wen Wei Pao*, publisher Li Zisong showed his stand clearly after the Chinese government imposed martial law in Beijing on May 20. He personally decided to publish the famous editorial on May 21. The editorial carried only



four characters: Tonxin Jishou ("heart-stricken") in a sea of white space. The editorial acted as a strong protest to the Beijing authorities. Mr. Chen Baojien, the deputy publisher who represents the interest of NCNA, agreed to this editorial and said that he was prepared to end up in jail in Beijing.<sup>17</sup>

In *Ta Kung Pao*, Mr. Tsang Tak Shing, the chief editor, admitted that even he himself was too involved to carry out the duty of gatekeeping. "In that atmosphere I cannot help but be affected by my emotion. My work discipline was loosened."<sup>18</sup> He said.

He cited two examples. The first was the story about clashes between rival camps of troops after June 4. He said that the whole story was based on a telephone interview with a man in the Beijing University. Nobody knew who that man was.

The second example was a story sent by a reporter in Beijing after the massacre. The story described how a girl was shot thirty times before she died.<sup>19</sup> The reporter later confessed that the story was based on the descriptions of a waiter in the hotel.

Mr. Tsang said that if he had thought about it calmly, he would not have agreed to publishing these stories. "There was no way you can confirm these reports during that time. You had to rely on you own judgement," Mr. Tsang said, "my judgement at that moment was that these things were possible and reasonable. You could not help but be affected by your personal feeling under that kind of atmosphere."

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<sup>17</sup> Li Zisong, " Wind and Rain Started by Bureaucrats," The Contemporary Magazine, Dec.16, 1989.

<sup>18</sup> Personal. interview.

<sup>19</sup> The story was quoted in page 97 in this thesis.



As a result of the loosening of control from NCNA and the strong personal involvement in the crisis, both *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Pao* took an unusual move to deviate from their pro-Chinese government stand for the first time in forty years.

### Control Resumed After Crisis

Deng Xiaoping's public appearance on June 9 was the turning point which marked the end of the uncertainties in Beijing. It was also after Deng's appearance that NCNA gradually resumed the control over *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Pao*.

It was known that Mr. Xu Jiataun, director of NCNA at that time, had talked to the publishers and chief editors of both *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Pao* shortly after June 9 and asked them to "slowly turned around".<sup>20</sup> It was also reported that senior Chinese leaders had instructed NCNA to "recapture the leftist papers just like recapturing the Tiananmen Square".<sup>21</sup>

As a result, both *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Pao* re-adopted their pro-Beijing line in less than two months after the June 4 massacre. However, there was a different process of "normalization" in the two leftist newspapers.

In *Ta Kung Pao*, chief editor Tsang Tak Shing told his staff shortly after June 9 that *Ta Kung Pao* had to "try to preserve its unique position to be able to publish in the Mainland" and "that this is the only way *Ta Kung Pao* can continue its contribution to improve the situation in China."<sup>22</sup> His words were widely seen by the *Ta Kung* staff as a clear message that *Ta Kung* had to revert

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<sup>20</sup> See Li Zisong, "If I Agreed to Turn Around," *The Contemporary Magazine*, March 24, 1990. It is also confirmed by senior ranking editors in both *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Pao*.

<sup>21</sup> *The Hong Kong Economic Times*, June 22, 1989.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with a *Ta Kung* reporter.



to its pro-Beijing stand.

Later, Mr. Tsang made it clear to his staff that "as a discipline, *Ta Kung Pao* had to "stand by its own line". Sensitive criticisms, "such as those by the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of the Chinese Patriotic Pro-democracy Movement cannot be published." <sup>23</sup>

Defending himself against criticisms of swaying, Tsang Tak Shing interpreted the situation this way, "*Ta Kung Pao* had never taken a stand to overturn the Communist leadership," he stressed, " we usually considered the views of the Chinese government as very important. It was just that during the crisis, the uncertainties lowered the authority of the government or certain leaders of the government. After the crisis, the views of the Chinese government, now stable, has again become an important factor in our considerations."

The *Ta Kung Pao* staff, on the other hand, took the change as "inevitable". <sup>24</sup> Two reporters left. Those who stay have to suppress their personal feelings. "We cannot change the stand of the newspaper on our own," said a *Ta Kung Pao* reporter, " as long as I am not forced to write something to support their massacre, I will stay."

Such was the process of how *Ta Kung Pao* reverted to its traditional stand. The process of *Wen Wei Pao*, however, was not that smooth. Mr. Li Zisong, the publisher of *Wen Wei Pao*, had refused to respond to the advice of NCNA. There was sharp confrontation between him and Mr. Chen Baojien, the deputy publisher, over the editorial line of the newspaper since the

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<sup>23</sup> Personal interview with Mr. Tsang Tak Shing.

<sup>24</sup> Personal interview with a *Ta Kung Pao* reporter.



public appearance of Deng Xiaoping on June 9.<sup>25</sup> On July 14, 1989, NCNA "terminated the service" of Mr. Li. Thirty reporters and editors resigned in support of their former publisher. Since then, *Wen Wei Pao* joined *Ta Kung Pao* again in the camp of "patriotic newspapers under the leadership of the Chinese Communist party".

## 10.2 The Commercial Press

### Self-control in Normal Times

Interviewees from both *Ming Pao* and *Sing Pao* reported that they enjoy relatively high autonomy in their work.<sup>26</sup> A *Sing Pao* reporter even complained of the lack of guidelines from the editorial staff.<sup>27</sup>

Even so, it would be wrong to assume that there is no organizational control in the commercial newspapers. Unlike the leftist press, the commercial newspapers do not usually tell their reporters how certain stories should be written. However, the editors know how stories "should not be written".

In *Sing Pao*, for example, things that are "too radical" are usually avoided. These include "sensitive criticisms with an explicit stand against Hong Kong or Chinese government."<sup>28</sup> These are not written rules. Nor has anyone been formally briefed on this. However, they are accepted " naturally by almost

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<sup>25</sup> For a detail description of what happened in *Wen Wei Pao* after June 9, see "The Memoirs of Li Zisong," in the Contemporary Magazine from November 1989 to April 1990.

<sup>26</sup> A deputy chief editor of *Ming Pao* recalled only one time in recent years that Mr. Louis Cha, the publisher, had tried to interfere with the daily reporting of news regarding the Basic Law. However, Mr. Cha refrained from pushing too hard after the staff protested strongly.

<sup>27</sup> Personal interview.

<sup>28</sup> Personal interview with a high ranking editor of *Sing Pao*.



all *Sing Pao* reporters and editors as an important part of their news judgement.<sup>29</sup>

In *Ming Pao*, the unwritten rules was that "it should avoid elements that would de-stabilize the society of Hong Kong". " *Ming Pao* is a well established newspaper," remarks a deputy chief editor of the newspaper, "like all established newspapers we are for a stable environment".<sup>30</sup> Like *Sing Pao*, these unwritten rules are widely accepted by its staff.

It should be noted, however, that these unwritten rules are accepted by most reporters and editors voluntarily and sometimes unconsciously. As one *Sing Pao* reporter pointed out, " I don't usually think of the interest of the newspaper when I write stories. However, I know what I write can be published.....It's just part of my own news judgement."<sup>31</sup>

#### During The Crisis

It is found that, however, these unwritten rules were not observed during the crisis period in the student movement last year. Contrary to their traditional "neutrality", both newspapers had taken a clear stand against the Chinese government in their reports after the imposition of martial law. After the massacre, they were even as radical as the rightist *Hong Kong Times*.<sup>32</sup> Interviewees in both *Ming Pao* and *Sing Pao* attributed this to their strong personal feelings in support of the students that time.

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<sup>29</sup> Personal interview with a *Sing Pao* reporter.

<sup>30</sup> Personal interview.

<sup>31</sup> Personal interview.

<sup>32</sup> See chapter eight of this thesis.



"A reporter is just a man," said a deputy chief editor of *Ming Pao*, "it was impossible for him to keep calm in such a crisis."

"You know you should be objective, but you just can't," echoed a *Sing Pao* reporter.

The involvement of the journalists was so high that even the publisher could do nothing. "We have always stressed neutrality and objectivity," recalled Mr. Louis Cha, the publisher of *Ming Pao*, in an editorial, "during the critical period (of the student movement), I reminded them of this several times a day. However...how could one still be completely calm and objective in that critical moment?"<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand, the uncertainties during the crisis left the journalists with no other means but relying on their own judgement to interpret the situation. And their judgements were seriously affected by their personal feelings. Two days after the massacre, for example, *Ming Pao* inaccurately reported that Premier Li Peng was shot by a body guard. A deputy chief editor of the newspaper explained that they got the story from a usually reliable source but had no way to confirm it. "But under that circumstances we decided that it was totally possible that someone would have tried to kill Li Peng for what he had done," he said, "therefore we decided to run the story."

A *Sing Pao* editor also recalled how he decided to publish the story that China was in the "crisis of civil war".<sup>34</sup> "It was already two o'clock in the morning when I saw on CNN that rival troops in China were fighting fiercely,"

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<sup>33</sup> Editorial of *Ming Pao*, May 20, 1990.

<sup>34</sup> *Sing Pao*, June 6, 1989.



he said, "I was expecting this to happen. I did not hesitate to believe it and asked to revise the layout of page one which had already been prepared."

### After The Crisis

Like the leftist press, the commercial newspapers gradually revert to its "neutral" stand after the public appearance of Deng Xiaoping on June 9. Reporters and editors of *Ming Pao* and *Sing Pao* attribute the change to two reasons.

First, the appearance of Deng Xiaoping and the following Central Committee meeting marked an end to the uncertainties in the Chinese leadership. The journalists had to re-adjust their evaluation of the situation. "We have to admit that the present leadership is the legitimate Chinese government," said a *Sing Pao* editor, "we cannot be too radical against them. We are not the *Hong Kong Times*."

The second reason was that the strong personal feelings of the journalists gradually died down after a period of lapse. Their commitment to objectivity and balance reporting, once disappeared during the crisis, again became a major factor in their news judgement. As a *Ming Pao* reporter pointed out, "When you calmed yourself down you began to feel that you may have been going too far during the crisis." As a result, the journalists took pains too avoid being affected by their personal feeling in their reports.

The process of the revert of the commercial press may be best summed up by a *Sing Pao* reporter as follows, "During that period your personal involvement was so strong..., you allowed yourself to do things that you don't usually do....and there was no one to control you. When the situation returns to normal, you just can't do that anymore."



### 10.3 The Rightist press

Our interviews revealed that the routine way of news framing in the *Hong Kong Times* had not quite been challenged during the crisis last year.

Unlike the leftist press and the commercial press, the organizational interest of the *Times* was clear and strong throughout the whole incident last year. A deputy chief editor of the *Times* said that they did "what they have been doing for forty years" in reporting the student movement and the massacre in Beijing last year. "Our line was clear," he said, "the Beijing students were righteous in resisting the dictatorship. We have to point this out to our readers. We have been standing firmly by this line."<sup>35</sup>

The uncertainties in the Chinese leadership did not constitute any difficulties for the *Times*. According to the deputy chief editor, "it didn't make any difference to us. They were still Communists after all."

The journalists of the *Times*, most of them Hong Kong citizens, were also strongly involved. But since their stand coincided with the interests of the newspapers, it is difficult to tell whether the personal interests of the journalists were less suppressed during the crisis.

A *Times* reporter who was sent to Beijing to cover the student movement said that, "we did not have to play up or play down anything. We just reported the facts in the way I saw them. Everything was just as usual."

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<sup>35</sup> Personal interview.



# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### 11.1 The Existence of the Crisis Mode in News Framing

This study found an interesting pattern in the framing of the Tiananmen Square Incident by the Hong Kong Press. At first, newspapers with different organizational interests (leftist, rightist and commercial) framed the movement in completely different ways. However, they converged with each other as the situation gradually turned into a crisis. The convergence lasted for less than two months. When the situation was stabilized, different types of newspapers again provided different frames, each according to their own organizational interest. The following table summarizes the patterns of the news frames observed in different stages of the movement:

	<u>Stage 1</u> <u>(Routine)</u>	<u>Stage 2</u> <u>(Transitional)</u>	<u>Stage 3</u> <u>(Crisis)</u>	<u>Stage 4</u> <u>(Routine)</u>
<u>Leftist</u>	Mourning	Problem-solving	Pro-democ. Anti-govt.	Pro-govt.
<u>Commercial</u>	Tension Conflict	Pro-democ.	Pro-democ. Anti-govt.	neutral moderate
<u>Rightist</u>	Pro-democ. Anti-govt.	Pro-democ. Anti-govt.	Pro-democ. Anti-govt.	Anti-govt.

During the first stage of the movement, the leftist *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Pao* reported the marches and demonstrations during this period as part of the activities to mourn the death of the former General Party Secretary Hu



Yaobang. The political demands of the students were played down. The "mourning frame" served to de-politicize the whole student movement. By so framing the student movement, the authority of the Chinese Communist Party would not be seriously challenged.

Meanwhile, the rightist *Hong Kong Times* framed the movement with totally different emphases. According to the description of the *Times*, the movement was a massive resistance against the Communist regime. It was obvious that the "anti-government" frame, served the interest of the Taiwanese authorities.

The commercial newspapers, on the other hand, paid less attention than the partisan press to the political implications of the movement. Although they did not play down the pro-democracy nature of the movement as the leftist press did, they were not as keen as the *Times* to frame the movement within a anti-Communist context. Instead, the commercial papers were more interested in the tensions and the conflicts between demonstrators and the police.

The "tension frame" of the commercial newspapers was also in line with their organizational interests. As we have pointed out in Chapter Four of this thesis, commercial newspapers are careful not to be involved too much in political affairs. As a result, they were more interested in reporting what happened at the scene rather than the implications. In the case of demonstrations and riots, then, conflicts and tensions became a natural news angle.

During the second stage, however, the situation gradually moved from a routine to a crisis. The news frames of the leftist press and the commercial press began to shift.



The leftist press started to deviate from the official line since the publication of the *People's Daily* editorial on April 26 which denounced the student movement as an anti-Communist conspiracy. However, the deviation was relatively subtle. Sensitive criticisms against the Government and the Party were carefully and tactfully avoided by both *Ta Kung* and *Wen Wei*. Instead, they tried to play up "sensible" moves by both the students and the government in order to endorse a peaceful resolution of the problem.

The commercial newspapers, on the other hand, began to give up their neutral stand and took side with the students. At the beginning of the second stage of the movement, *Sing Pao* stuck to its "conflict" and "tension" frames. *Ming Pao*, on the other hand, shifted to a "problem-solving" approach which was similar to that of the leftist press. However, after the Chinese government refused to hold "open dialogues" with the students who were staging a hunger strike, both commercial papers no longer avoided being involved in politics. They began to express clearly their support for the demands of the students. They also blamed the government for being stubborn and inhuman.

The imposition of martial law on May 20 marked the beginning of the crisis stage. During this stage, the three types of newspapers (leftist, commercial and rightist) exhibited no difference at all in the framing of the situation. All of them firmly supported the people and condemned the government for enhancing the tension in the Chinese capital. The convergence intensified after the June 4 massacre. For a couple of days after that, it was almost impossible to tell whether a story was carried by leftist or rightist newspapers by just reading it.



Yet, the converged pattern totally changed after the public appearance of Deng Xiaoping on June 9. In less than four months, the leftist press and the commercial press gradually reverted to their routine stand. The leftist press again followed the Party line closely. The 40th anniversary of the Republic was reported by both *Wen Wei* and *Ta Kung* as a fabulous event without mentioning the bloodshed in the Tiananmen Square just 120 days ago. This is a clear indicator that the massacre no longer plays a part in the leftist press's journalistic paradigm on Chinese political news.

The commercial press, on the other hand, gradually took away phases and expressions that served to de-legitimize the Chinese government in their stories. Like the leftist press, the commercial newspapers reverted to their old stand and put themselves in a "neutral" position towards the Beijing regime again.

This sums up the frame shift of the Hong Kong press on the whole Tiananmen Square Incident. The next question to ask, of course, is: Why did it happen this way?

We have hypothesized that during a crisis, (1) the organizational control on journalists will be loosened because of the uncertainties of the situation; (2) the strong personal involvement of journalists will turn them into advocates rather than gatekeepers and (3) as a result, the personal interest of journalists will become more important in the framing of news in a crisis than in a routine situation. These suppositions seemed to fit very well in explaining the frame shift of the Hong Kong press during the Tiananmen Square Incident.

In half a year's time, the Hong Kong press have moved from the routine mode to the crisis mode and then back to the routine mode again. During



the first stage of the pro-democracy movement in Beijing in 1989, the situation still seemed to be under control. Although there were rallies and riots, the political structure of the Chinese government was relatively stable. The involvement of Hong Kong people, on the other hand, was still low. In other words, the Hong Kong press was then still operating in the routine mode.

In the routine mode, as we have pointed out, the organizational control on the journalists is always effective. Personal feelings of the journalists are suppressed. As a result, news framing is usually dominated by organizational interests. It is no wonder, therefore, that three different types of newspapers framed the movement with completely different emphases, each according to their organizational interests.

However, following the students' persistent hunger strike and the imposition of martial law in mid May, the crisis precipitated. As we have pointed out Chapter Three of this thesis, a crisis is usually featured with uncertainties and high involvement among members of the society. It is found that under such circumstances, organizational control in newspapers began to weaken. The journalists' personal inclinations became more important in news framing.

The picture was particularly clear in the two leftist papers, *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Pao*. Our findings indicated that both papers were tightly controlled in routine times by the Beijing authorities through the local branch of NCNA. Yet, during the crisis, the situation was so uncertain that even NCNA were not able to give instructions. As a result, the reporting and editorial staff of the newspapers became the major definers of the situation. Their strong involvement pushed both *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Pao* to a anti-government stand.



In the two commercial newspapers, the situation was a bit more complicated. The publishers of both *Ming Pao* and *Sing Pao* seldom control the content of their newspapers directly. However, the organizational cannon of the newspaper, such as to be "neutral" , "responsible" and "not being radical", are usually internalized by the journalists unconsciously as part of their professional judgement.

During the crisis, the strong involvement turned the reporters and editors of the commercial newspapers from gatekeepers into advocates. "Neutrality" and "moderation" could no longer suppress their personal interests. Because of the uncertainties of the situation, on the other hand, the journalists had to rely more on their personal judgement to define the situation. As a result, the framing of the crisis was also dominated by the journalists' personal interests in the commercial press.

The ambiguities of the situation were gradually cleared when Deng Xiaoping was seen at the front stage again on June 9, 1989. Since then, the Hong Kong press had slowly reverted to the routine mode. Organizational interests of newspapers again became the major factor of news framing.

The process was again more obvious in the leftist press. After Deng's re-appearance, NCNA regained control on both *Wen Wei Pao* and *Ta Kung Pao* step by step. It (NCNA) successfully did so in less than two months. The two leftist papers once again became "patriotic newspapers under the leadership of the Communist Party". Although quite a number of journalists were not happy with this, they could do nothing other than quitting or remaining silent.

In the commercial press, the process of reverting was more subtle. Unlike the leftist press, there was no pressure from "up above". It was just that



the journalists began to revert to their routine way of thinking when the situation gradually calmed down. Organizational and professional interest once again became major factors in their considerations. They were again keen to avoid being seen as radical and biased. Voluntarily and unconsciously, they joined the leftist press in going back to the routine mode of news framing.

A fair challenge to this conclusion can be pointed at the case of commercial newspapers. It can be argued that both *Ming Pao* and *Sing Pao* took an anti-Beijing stand only because their publishers were also enraged by the high-handed measures of the Chinese government. In other words, the shifts in news frames during the crisis in the two commercial papers were due to the shift in organizational interests rather than the loosening of organizational control. This is a sensible argument except for one weakness: it fails to differentiate between the personal attitude of the newspapers' publisher and the interests of the newspaper itself. In fact, the two are not always identical. It is true that the publisher's views do play a very important role in deciding the editorial policy of the newspaper. However, even the publisher himself/herself has to sometimes refrain from pushing his/her own view too far in order not to jeopardise the survival of the newspaper. The fact that commercial newspapers always take a neutral and moderate stand does not necessarily mean that the publishers of these newspapers are also always neutral and moderate. It can be just that the publishers have hidden their personal views from time to time in order not to let their newspapers be criticized as "biased" and "radical".

Now let us go back to the Tiananmen Square incident. It is sensible to believe that both the publishers of *Ming Pao* and *Sing Pao* also shared the rage of their subordinates during the peak of the student movement. In fact, Mr. Louis



Cha, the publisher of Ming Pao, was seen burst into tears in a television interview after the June 4 massacre. However, what they thought is not the main point in our discussion. It is because, as discussed above, the publishers can still refrain from pushing their own views if they are against the interest of the newspapers. The point is, therefore, why they did not stop their newspapers from taking an explicit anti-Beijing stand-- something that might seriously jeopardize the survival of their newspapers.

The answer, I think, still lies within our discussion of news framing in crisis. In the Tiananmen Square crisis, the situation was so uncertain that it became very difficult for the publishers to judge what the best interests for their newspapers were. It was not sure whether the "reformists", led by former Party Secretary Zhao Ziyang, or the "Li-Yang clique" would have survived the power struggle within the Chinese leadership. The political vacuum, therefor, provided a leeway for personal interpretations.

It was against this background that the publishers of commercial newspapers allowed their editors and reporters to show an explicit stand during the crisis. The fact that the publishers probably shared the same view no doubt gave the journalists more room to express their own personal inclinations. We do not know what would have happened if the publishers stood by Li Peng while the journalists supported Zhao Ziyang. But if it had not been for the uncertainties during the crisis, such explicit anti-Beijing stand would not be found in commercial newspapers even if their publishers were strongly dissatisfied with Premier Li Peng or other senior leaders in the Communist regime.

## 11.2 Crisis Mode of News Framing Reconsidered



This study reveals some of the differences between routine and crisis news framing. Like all case studies, this study cannot avoid being criticised as lacking generalizing power. The uniqueness of the Tiananmen Square tragedy makes this criticism even more valid. The incident is no doubt an extreme example of a crisis where both uncertainties and involvement are extraordinarily high. However, as a preliminary study, these extremities unveil more clearly how differently a news event can be framed in the routine mode and the crisis mode. Similar studies on other types and scales of crises are recommended to explore the features of news framing in a crisis situation. It is only through comparisons of different studies are we able to grasp the whole picture.

I think it can fairly be argued that during all crises, news organizations will depend more on the journalists to define the situation than in normal times. One simple reason is that in a crisis, no matter it be a coup attempt or a natural disaster, there is usually not enough time and way to carry out the normal gatekeeping process. Furthermore, as pointed out before, journalists are less reserved to put forward their own interpretations in crises than in routine situation.

However, it would be wrong to assume that personal inclinations of journalists will become the major factor in the framing of any crises as they were in the framing of the Tiananmen Square Incident. At least two more variables must be taken into consideration before we draw a conclusion on how powerful the journalists' personal perceptions are in crises framing.

One possible variable is the scale of the crisis. It seemed natural that in a small crisis, it is easier for news organizations to maintain the routine control on their staff than in a big one. On the other hand, the involvement of



journalists in a small crisis would not be very high. It is supposed, therefore, that the bigger the scale of a crisis, the more important the journalists personal interest will be in news framing.

The other variable to be considered is crisis types with respect to the interests of different news organizations. There are certain types of crisis in which the news organizations interests are not challenged. The interests of the rightist *Hong Kong Times*, for example, were clear and strong in the Tiananmen Square crisis. Although we found that the *Times* also depended very much on its reporters to define the situation, its control on the staff was not so much weakened as it was in the leftist press and the commercial press.

The *Times'* example may not be very illustrative as, in this case, its organizational interests happened to be in line with the personal interests of its journalists. What if they are different? Perhaps we can imagine a war between the KMT and the Communist. In such a case, both the leftist and the rightist newspapers are expected to tighten up its control on the staff so that the situation will be interpreted favourably to its own side. The journalists' personal inclinations, should they be different from the interests of their organizations, will be suppressed. The journalists have either to conform to the organizational pressure or to resign.

It does not mean, however, that the crisis mode of news framing do not have any effect. We still expect that it works in commercial newspapers, where the organizational interests in this matter is not so clear and strong. In other words, whether news organizations have a strong and clear interest in a crisis also determined the degree to which the journalists' personal interests can affect news framing. It is supposed that the more uncertain the news



organizations interests are in a crisis, the more likely that the personal inclinations of the journalists would become the major factor in news framing.

### **11.3 Power Structure and Shifts of Journalistic Paradigms**

A number of studies have suggested that the mass media, either deliberately or unconsciously, usually support the dominant ideology and the existing power structure (e.g. Paletz et al. 1971; Tuchman 1978; Molotch et al. 1975; Chan 1987). Todd Gitlin (1980) argues that complete shifts in news frames was possible only when there were conflicts among power elites.

The findings of this study supported these notions. It is found that the Hong Kong press took an obvious anti-Beijing stand only when there were serious crises within the power structure of the Communist regime. During the peak of the student movement, General Party Secretary Zhao Ziyang and Premier Li Peng was fighting vigorously in a power struggle against each other. It was widely conceived that Zhao was supporting the students while Li advocated a tough stand. The conflict within the central leadership of the Communist Party induced the Hong Kong newspapers to opt for their own interpretation of the movement.

One interesting question to ask is whether the Hong Kong press would have acted the same way if there had been no vacuum in the Chinese leadership throughout the whole movement. Would the press still have taken such a firm anti-Beijing stand from mid May to June if they already knew that Li Peng was backed by Deng Xiaoping throughout the whole event? The answer is hard to find. What we know for sure, however, is that Deng Xiaoping's open support



for the massacre in early June was an important factor conducive to the "normalization" of both the leftist press and the commercial press. Deng's appearance was widely interpreted as an the end of the political conflict within the Chinese leadership. Obviously, it was not in the interests of Hong Kong newspapers to be hostile to a stable regime that is going to run Hong Kong after 1997.

#### **11.4 Implications on the Future of The Hong Kong Press**

Exceptions prove the rule. One of the interesting findings of this study is that, even after such a great shock like the Tiananmen Square massacre, the newspapers find no trouble in reverting to their old way of framing news in a very short time. This suggests that, as pointed out by Bennett et al. (1985), news paradigms do not shift easily. It also indicates how powerful the China factor is in shaping the journalistic paradigms of the Hong Kong Press.

Chan (1987) concludes that Hong Kong's newspapers had gradually shifted its journalistic paradigms in a direction favourable towards China since the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration on the future of Hong Kong in 1984. He also points out that the Hong Kong press's cooperative attitude towards the Chinese government will change only if China should damage the interest of Hong Kong, but the "regression" may be temporary and small-scale if the "one country two system" commitment still holds. This study seemed to support this prediction.

The interest of the commercial newspapers, the backbone of the Hong Kong press, lies in the stability and prosperity of Hong Kong. The



Tiananmen Square massacre was no doubt completely unacceptable to the people of Hong Kong. Yet, the Chinese government was quick to reiterate its commitment to Hong Kong.<sup>1</sup> The Chinese leadership, on the other hand, is stable. Under these circumstances, the commercial press was not prepared to be an long-term adversary of the Chinese government.

However, the behaviour of the Hong Kong press during the Tiananmen Square incident must have alarmed the Beijing authorities. It has already tightened up its control over the leftist press. The activities of Hong Kong reporters in China are also severely restricted. After 1997, the control of the press is expected to be more rigid. The premise of this pessimistic projection is, of course, that the present PRC government lasts beyond 1997.

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<sup>1</sup> Ji Pengfei, the director of the Hong Kong and Macau Office of the Chinese State Council, made a speech on Chinese television on June 22, stressing that the "one country, two system" commitment had not changed.



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